

Journey Through Time

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Summary: The war was over and they had won. Without warning a disaster strikes at the heart of Konoha leaving only three survivors. The disaster's name? Uchiha Sasuke. With nothing tethering them to the present they decide to embark on a quest to change the past, to save the future. With a new nindo its a new Naruto. Time travel AU. Strong/Smart Naruto. Bloodline Naruto. Naru/Shika.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

A/N: This will be my first attempt at writing fanfiction so do try and bear with me. Starting off a little background as to the way things are. Naruto will have two bloodlines: Mokuton (wood release) and Yōton (lava release). Moving on this is also a time travel story and obviously AU. While Naruto may appear to be godlike...he isn't its simply a matter of having more experience than other Shinobi, although his skills will be diminished because my time travel only moves their mind meaning a re-training montage only worse cause poor little blonde Hokage already had massive reserves as a child. Obviously will be some OOCness because author.

So, Naruto won't be an idiot, and this will likely take on a darker tone/theme for his childhood. I really don't think scared people who think a child is a demon and realize he isn't going to defend himself aren't going to capitalize on that and make his life as miserable as possible. There will be some bashing if you consider an honest assessment of certain character aspects to be bashing. Suppose I'll just get this out of the way now. Naruto is gay, as is Shikamaru (I think you guys can make the appropriate connection here). Before anybody freaks out that this is going to be nothing but yaoi smut, it's not. It probably won't have any lemons, though they may be some Naru/Shika moments that go beyond being friends, but again I promise nothing because sometimes a little lemon is good if it can be executed properly. Naruto is going to kill because he's a shinobi and part of that requires killing, so probably won't be any talk-no-jutsu but again I promise nothing. I don't have any ideas for any original characters at the moment but that doesn't mean they won't ever appear.

Updates will be whenever I have the time to write and feel like writing, and get around to updating. I welcome your **CONSTRUCTIVE** criticism and thoughts/opinions on this story. If you just plan on being mean for the sake of making somebody else feel small, inferior, and/or think poorly of themselves I would politely ask you to fuck off.

I suppose I should mention I don't own Naruto? So here let me throw in some legalese you guys have read like a million times by now. *Cough* Naruto is a series created by Masashi Kishimoto. He owns it, I don't. Now on with the show...err story!

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Chapter 1 – The Beginning

"Are you both sure you want to go through with this?" Questioned a tall blonde-haired man standing in the center of a complex seal array. "I mean fūinjutsu is one of those arts where the only way to see if it works is to try it...and if this fails well I don't really need to spell out what that means for us." He was trying to maintain his composure and offer his two companions an escape from what he views as a suicide, but necessary, mission. 'It IS suicide to try something this stupid. Time is the one law we can't defy and here I am trying to defy it!' He bemoaned to himself. He knew he had to offer them a chance to stay and do...something. Whatever it was, but he also knew they'd follow him because there was nothing left for them here. No home, no people, nothing but death and ash. "I have to go because this is all my fault. Before either of you bother trying to interject, it WAS my fault. I am, or was, the Hokage. Not either of you, ME." His usually cheerful and carefree tone was a mix of extreme suffering and hope. "I have to make everything right for the people I care about." He turns a steely gaze toward one of his companions, a usually lazy and unmotivated pineapple-head, trying to convey his thoughts and feelings. 'For you.'

"Tsk. This is already so damn troublesome but what have we realistically got left to lose? The village is gone now as are its people. You always told us that it was the people that made a village. Well I know you can smell what's left of them, your senses were always more sensitive than mine and I can smell it." Droned a melancholic, expressionless Shikamaru. "Besides, where you go I go. I mean who else is going to keep you out of trouble and under control?" A cheeky smirk got plastered on his face as he glanced toward *his* Naruto who 'Hrmp'ed as if insulted that he needed to be watched in the first place. 'Tsk...guess I really am committed to that blonde-haired idiot if I'm thinking of him as mine.'

"It would be illogical for you to do this alone Hokage-sama. Why you ask? Because trouble always follows wherever you go, and three aces are infinitely better." Shino gave his input as he almost always does, with little emotion in his voice and body language. It was actually quite comforting to Naruto that Shino was capable of behaving normally despite where they stood. While most people found the Aburame clan weird or disgusting, Naruto admired their stoicism and fierce loyalty to their clan and village. He had seen what an angry Aburame is capable of with their more... dangerous insects and it terrified him but also gave him a much greater respect for the symbiotic clan. They weren't that unlike himself. He too had a source of unimaginable, and sometimes uncontrollable, power within him that took strength of will and determination to control properly. Well at least in the past. Now that Kurama and he were friends things were much easier, still the kinship is there.

"Sometimes I wonder how you guys survived me all these years. I mean I know I wasn't exactly the easiest person to be around for either of you. You both prefer the calm quiet things in life, and if there's one thing I am not its quiet. Although I have calmed considerably since my childhood...I think?" He turned to stare out over the horizon trying to build up his own confidence that this would work. 'It has to work. We've lost too much for this to not work.' He was standing in his favorite place in the whole world, well aside from next to Shikamaru, his father's head on the Hokage monument. His eyes flicked over the still smoldering remains of his home. It was his duty to protect Konoha...and he had failed miserably in the end. He continued to stare out over the village while his two closest remaining friends moved to stand on either side of him.

"I definitely like this you over the old you," Shikamaru saw Naruto shift uncomfortably at his words "no offense Ruto but you were loud, overconfident, and your nindo was so absurd that it caused you nothing but pain. I know a lot of it was how the village treated you," he slung his arm over Naruto's shoulders and pulled him close with a side hug, "but I couldn't stand to see you suffer under the weight of your own promises. You put too much on yourself to the point you didn't know how to stop."

"You didn't mention how stupid I was." Naruto briefly and quietly interjected.

"You may have fooled everybody else with the loud and stupid routine but sorry to say you're far too young to fool a Nara." He felt Naruto relax ever so slightly in the embrace. 'I mean seriously when he was outrunning the chūnin, jōnin, and eventually the ANBU after his pranks how could anyone believe Uzumaki Naruto was anything but intelligent?' "Which is why I know this is going to work because I trust in your skills and abilities Naruto, because you *ARE* the Hokage." He turned Naruto's head toward him to better reach his lips before planting a deep kiss on him conveying his absolute trust and faith in him. "I just wish for once you'd be able to have faith in yourself."

Naruto continued to stare at Shikamaru's face trying to memorize every inch of his features as if he might disappear at a moment's notice. "He is right Naruto-san," Naruto turned to look at Shino at the sudden informality that was a rarity for any Aburame, "It is illogical for you to think less of your abilities. Why you ask? Because you were chosen to be Hokage above every other candidate. You are undoubtedly the most skilled shinobi to come from our village in decades, and not because of some latent natural talent, but because you push yourself harder than anyone else. Truthfully, your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness. You strive to constantly make yourself stronger to protect what's precious to you; but you never think you are strong enough, so you constantly doubt yourself and your own abilities before repeating the cycle." Naruto stood silent, contemplating the Aburame's words and trying to accept his friends' belief in his ability but unable to reconcile his many failures with that belief. For a man of few words as Shino oft was, to hear him speak with so much feeling was surprising to say the least.

"You should listen to those ningen (humans) kit." A deep comforting voice bellowed in his head and Naruto brought himself to his own mindscape to stand before the mighty Kyūbi no Yōko. **"You are the first of your kind since father walked this plane to have befriended me kit. A great accomplishment that you owe to the person you have become. You just need to stop doubting yourself and have as much faith in your abilities as everybody else around you."** Kurama went back to resting his head on his front paws while Naruto gawked at the bijū before him. "How can I have faith in myself when everything I've done has resulted in all of this? My home is gone and almost all of my friends are dead!" He shouted angrily as he began to weep in his own mind. "We may have won the war but look at what happened because of me! If somebody else had been Hokage this wouldn't have happened!" **"Or it would have happened anyway, and your village would still be destroyed but you along with it eliminating any hope of fixing this"** Kurama was quick to retort at the still fuming and despondent blonde. "You can't know that! You ca..." Kurama roared back in anger before he could finish, **"AND YOU CAN'T KNOW THAT EITHER!"** As quickly as his anger rose it subsided as he wrapped one of his tails around the boy trying to calm the distraught child, for in many ways Naruto is still a child, **"Look kit, you can't know what happened and there's no use thinking about what might have been. You spent weeks designing this seal of yours, and it's the best chance of changing everything that's happened which is what you want. Those two ningen who are standing beside you are willing to risk everything to help you. You have always tried to shield your friends from danger but in many ways, this was holding them back. They won't be strong enough to defend themselves if you always step in front of them."** Naruto's eyes softened as he allowed himself to be comforted by Kurama's surprisingly soft fur, although he learned not to comment on such things long ago. Kurama and he may be friends, but he has his reputation as a bijū to maintain. **"You know what needs to be done, now you just need to do it. Now get out! Your mate is growing concerned at your silence."** Before Naruto could protest that Shikamaru was more than just his mate, Kyūbi's tail flung him out of the mindscape and back into the real world. **"You don't need to tell me that kit its bad enough having to hear the two of you together when you're in your moods."** He thought with a pronounced sigh.

"Ruto!" Shikamaru was shaking the blonde at this point as his eyes lost that glazed over look, "Finally you're back with us. Kyūbi help talk some sense into your troublesome head?" The levity in his voice poorly masked his obvious concern over his friend's state of mind.

"Yeah Kyūbi finally managed to calm me down, you missed a little argument, but he pretty much said what you wanted to 'Quit being an idiot you idiot! Your friends believe in you so just shut up and do it!' Honestly where the fuzzbutt gets off telling me not to worry I'll never know." He ignored the loud growl he heard in his mind. "You two have always stood by me and I guess I should trust that you both wouldn't do something stupid without really thinking about it. Since we're going to do this we should at least come up with some kind of plan for when we get back. I only wish I had more control over where we'll end up. There's no guarantee that we'll even end up in the same timeline. There's so many theories about what might happen if we do this, but they're just that...theories. This will all be for naught if we end up in a timeline where our knowledge is meaningless."

"It is illogical for you to concern yourself over such things Naruto-san. Why you ask? Because if you have no way of knowing then all that is left is for you to believe that we will end up where we need to and deal with what comes."

Naruto wanted to do what Shino said, but it was just so hard! Space-time seals were already an exceptionally difficult field when trying to move across the same plane in the same time, and now we're actively trying to reverse time! "I have no idea what will happen, where we'll be, and what we'll look like. If I've done everything correctly, and that's a big *if*, we should end up somewhere around our graduation from the Academy give or take a year or so, and we should end up in our younger bodies but retain our memories and some of our abilities." The gravity of what that meant for Naruto finally sank in as his shoulders slumped drastically and he let out a heavy sigh, "I'll have to go back to being hated and feared, as awful as it sounds I hope we end up at a time where I'm in the hospital after somebody else tried to kill the fox brat...at least then I could more easily justify a dramatic behavioral shift."

His voice once again took on a depressed and somber tone as Shikamaru walked up behind him and wrapped him in another hug. "You won't be alone this time Ruto. You'll have me and Shino there with you, and we won't let anybody keep us apart. Not again. As much as I'm looking forward to making the future bright again, I'm happier to be setting some of your childhood right by being a better friend to you." A silent and firm nod of agreement from Shino was enough to make a few tears fall from his eyes.

'I honestly don't think I could survive it all again without either of them, or you Kurama.' The tears were flowing more freely now. 'I didn't know any better back then but now that I know how horrible my childhood was, I really don't think I could do this alone.' He felt a warmth begin to radiate from his stomach where his seal stood unlocked. **'I promise kit you won't be alone again, even if its just us I won't let you suffer like that again.'** Kurama's promise made the blonde smile slightly and think a silent 'thanks' to his oldest and perhaps best non-human friend.

Naruto relaxed into Shikamaru's embrace and faster than his brain could comprehend his mouth began to move on its own, "I finished it you know Shika," even though he couldn't see his face he knew there was a perplexed look on his face, "I was going to tell you and surprise Yoshino-san with it. She always wanted grandchildren and I know a part of you felt some guilt at not being able to give her that after everything she's done for you." The 'and me' was silent as he turned to look at the man he loved. "I spent almost all my free time working on a seal that would work and with baa-chan's help I finally came up with something that would've worked and allowed us to conceive a child." He didn't know why he was telling him, it was all pointless now. Even if this does work and the end up changing things for the better it will be years before they're in a position to broach the subject again.

He felt Shikamaru's embrace grow tighter as he waited for a response. Any response was preferable to waiting even if it was a rejection or disbelief at the possibility. He was never a patient person, and his brain was wrought with worry during the waiting. "I didn't even know you were working on something like that." Naruto could feel the smirk threatening to bubble out onto his face. "It's just like you to come up with something like that"

though isn't it? You always were the number one most unpredictable ninja ever. With any luck you'll get to surprise a hell-of-a lot more than just kaa-san with that one." Shikamaru let out a series of quiet chuckles, "Although tou-san might just find it to be too troublesome."

A loud bark of laughter flew out of Naruto's mouth, "You'd probably find the whole thing troublesome too and don't you try to deny it. But of course, I'd try to find a way to make it happen. Don't get me wrong I know there's loads of orphans out there who need a good home but being an orphan, I always wanted to find somebody I could love and cherish and raise our own kids with." A frown settled on his face. "Does that make me a bad person Shika? To ignore the many children who want the same thing I want just because I can have my own children?"

"It doesn't make you a bad person Ruto, and I know you'd never ignore them. You can't expect me to believe that you thought nobody noticed how much of your mission pay went to the orphanages did you?" The surprised look on Naruto's face was enough to make Shikamaru smile. "You may have tried to hide it, but you were always happier when you just so happened to pass by one of the orphanages as they surprised the children with new books, or blankets, or just some sweets." Realizing he was found out a blush made its way onto his face.

"I didn't think you were paying *that* much attention to me Shika." He tried to shrink and hide his face in his nonexistent collar.

"Well like father, like son. I heard your dad was just as clueless to your mother's affections until she threatened to beat him within an inch of his life for ignoring her feelings. Besides it's not like we couldn't adopt anyway." The suddenness of the last remark was said with such conviction that it thoroughly surprised Naruto. "But I'm cutting you off at four kids one way or the other! Two were already going to be troublesome enough, but I know you've always wanted a big family and I never was able to refuse you anything Ruto." Naruto turned around and once again planted a deep kiss of Shikamaru, not even registering the light blush on his cheeks at this previous admission, as he reached behind him to run his hand through his spiky yet tantalizingly soft hair. It was a needy kiss with both of them trying desperately to convey their feelings as their tongues danced frantically across one another.

A loud cough from Shino brought them both back to reality with a heavy blush setting into both of their faces. Naruto sheepishly rubbed the back of his head like he often did, "Heh. Sorry Shino guess we kinda got lost in the moment there huh?" Shino was always a private man, even by Aburame standards, and public displays of affection of an intimate nature were uncomfortable for him. "It is fine Naruto-san, but perhaps we should return to the matter at hand? After all it would not do for either of you to get distracted now of all times." With a sheepish laugh and an exasperated sigh Naruto and Shikamaru returned to work.

Naruto stepped away from Shikamaru and began to double check that the seal was right and there were no mistakes anywhere in it. The last thing they needed now was even the tiniest of mistakes, such occurrences could be disastrous when it comes to fūinjutsu. As he double and triple checked his work, "So when we get back at some point we need to meet up at least to confirm *who* made it back. It will have to be somewhere nobody will be around to overhear us which makes it harder for me...my ANBU minders were particularly more observant after the Uchiha incident and I don't plan on us going back that far."

"Just as we can't be overheard we also can't be somewhere unexpected for us. It'd be troublesome if people got suspicious because we went somewhere we don't usually go. Our friends and families were more observant than we ever gave them credit for back then." Naruto and Shino nodded in agreement with Shikamaru's words. Satisfied that the seal was as good as it could be Naruto turned back to look at the both of them.

"I suppose the least suspicious and most accessible place for us to meet would be at the Academy. The odds of us being overheard is highest here though, but we could always just communicate using the hand signs the Allied Forces came up with for the war. Nobody else would know them." Naruto tossed out his suggestion to his friends for their opinions.

"Unfortunately, we can't count on nobody recognizing them Ruto, they were based on signs from each of the Five Great Nations and Yamato-taicho would definitely recognize some of them. The last thing we need is to be hauled in before Ibiki because of a misinterpretation of our signs or incomplete information." Naruto sighed at Shikamaru's logic not questioning how Shikamaru knew Yamato would be one of his guards, it made the most sense for him to watch over the Jinchūriki, and Yamato knew enough of each Nation's hand signs to piece together what they were talking about. 'Stupid skillful shinobi.'

After a few more minutes of silence, as they each contemplated possible solutions, it was the reserved Aburame who spoke first. "I suggest we choose a word to say to each other as a means to check if we are us. Why you ask? Because finding a place where our presence would not draw attention is near impossible based on our past interactions with each other." Shikamaru and Naruto nodded at the logic and simplicity of Shino's solution; both grateful that Aburames, while logical thinkers, preferred the simplest solutions. Naruto threw an arm around Shino's shoulder.

"Leave it to Shino to come up with the best solution." Shino, who had grown accustomed to the physical affection Naruto liked to display toward his friends, merely nodded in response no longer uncomfortable with physical contact at least when it came to Naruto. "The only question now is what word we should use. It can't be something any of us said regularly back then or we might make a mistake." The three friends stood silently thinking about everything they knew of each other trying to find something they could use. **"You can use my name kit."** Naruto's eyes snapped open from his contemplative state. 'Are you sure Kurama? I know how much others knowing your name means to you. It's why I've never called you Kurama outside the mindscape.' His focus was entirely inward now as he waited his lifelong companion to give his consent. It was a great solution, nobody else in Konoha knew Kurama's name and to anybody else who overheard and recognized the name they'd just associate it with the Kurama clan that was located on the border of Hi no Kuni (Land of Fire) but they weren't well known within the village anymore. It was perfect! **"Yes kit I will allow you to tell them my name, but I must insist that you impress the importance of not sharing it with others. I will not allow my name to be known so easily by those I find undeserving Naruto."** The tone of Kurama's voice left little room for Naruto to argue, 'Thank you Kurama! I'll be sure to make them understand not to go tossing your name around.' He returned his focus outward. "Guys, Kyūbi says that we can use his name to test if we're us so long as you both promise not to ever utter his name to anybody else. He's very protective of his name." Shino and Shikamaru looked surprised, it wasn't every day you learned a bijū's name.

"I guess that'd work and it'd be too troublesome to explain how we knew his name anyway." Shino's silent nod of agreement was enough for Naruto.

"Alright then, when we meet up in the past we'll just say 'Kurama.' If anybody overhears us and gets curious all they'll find is a small clan of genjutsu users on the border of Hi no Kuni, why we'd be interested in them might confuse them but at the very least it'll throw them off track." **"Kit give me control for a second."** Without a second thought Naruto allowed Kurama to take control of his consciousness. **"Do not forget ningen my name is not to be thrown around carelessly. Names have power and none so more than a bijū's name!"** He began leaking some of his impressive killer intent toward them both. **"I don't like humans I don't trust knowing my name, but my kit seems to trust you both and you're both going to be helping him, so I shall choose to trust you as well. Betray me and I will eat you!"**

With his threat made Naruto retook control and smiled sheepishly at his two friends who were sweating profusely and letting relief wash over them

now that the oppressive aura was gone. "Sorry about that guys, like I said he's really protective of his name." Shino was the first to recover, at least to where he could speak.

"It is fine Naruto-san. Why you ask? Because I have no desire to be digested by Kyūbi." Naruto sighed, as Kurama smirked.

"Thanks Shino, way to inflate the fuzzball's ego even more." Shino didn't acknowledge the matter anymore than that. "I believe that should be all the plans we try to make until our return. Why you ask? It is illogical to waste more time planning out the rest of our lives when there is no guarantee this will work." Despite his trust in Naruto's ability Shino still disliked doing anything illogical or that would waste time.

"I agree with Shino we should just get started with this Ruto. "With a final nod to his two companions the young Hokage set about preparing the jutsu.

As he began channeling his and Kurama's chakra, **"Kit, I'll be asleep for a while when you wake up I'll be supplying most of the chakra for this seal of yours but be sure to include those ningen your so fond of any help is appreciated."** "I'll need both of you to channel your chakra into the seal while I perform the necessary hand signs in order for you to be sent back with me." They both nodded their understanding as they formed hand seals and began to channel their chakra out toward the seal. **"If you find some way to get my other half out of the Shinigami's stomach than I may awaken sooner. I have no clue how long it will take me to recover my chakra and awaken, it may be a few days, a few months, or it could even be years."** Turning his attention inward to stand before Kurama, for what could be the last time, "Don't worry Kurama I'll find a way to survive while you get your beauty sleep." He smirked as a tail came flying toward him which he quickly dodged, "I promise I'll find a way to get your other half back it must be horrible being only half a per...bein?" **"You have no idea how disheartening it is to be half complete kit but be careful with those promises of yours that ningen was right you put too much on yourself. I'd rather you promise to try and recover my other half rather than kill yourself doing it because if I wake up and you're dead...I will be very displeased."** The threat did not go unnoticed, "Don't worry Kurama I learned my lesson, no more impossible promises for me!" **"Good."** Sensing that Shikamaru and Shino had started focusing their chakra out Naruto slowly and methodically ran through the long series of hand seals necessary to execute the jutsu when he reached the end he felt compelled to shout the jutsu's name only to realize he had never named it. 'Huh. It's the little things in life we tend to forget.' Was his last coherent thought before the world was engulfed in a bright light before it faded to cold darkness.

The first thing he notices as he begins to stir is the sterile smell of antiseptic and the scratchy feeling of cheap sheets. 'Great. The hospital. I know I said it'd be convenient to wake up in the hospital, but I didn't think it'd actually happen.' He opened his eyes only to be greeted by the blank white ceiling and the offensive brightness of the fluorescent lights. 'Why the hell do they make these rooms so damn bright? A little color would certainly make these rooms more bearable. You'd think after all the complaints they make about shinobi fleeing the hospital as quickly as possible they'd try to improve the conditions.' He lets out another sigh. 'Some things never change. Now to try and figure out when I am.' He throws the sheet off his body trying to see how old he is. Looking down at his tiny frame he is immediately reminded of how poorly he is eating. 'Judging by the look of me I'd guess I'm eleven. Great another whole year of the academy to go. Might as well check to see what all I retained from this.' Expanding his senses, he begins to feel the chakra of the people around him as they go about their business. 'Huh, the hospital is busy today.' He silently begins to count the number of ANBU "guards" that have been assigned him. 'Let's see. There's one hiding in the tree outside my window, must be Yamato. Another hiding in the corner of the room using some sort of camouflaging jutsu, don't know them. One more outside in the corridor posing as a nurse checking on patients, or perhaps she's actually a nurse. An ANBU nurse, well stranger things have happened and even ANBU get sent to the hospital it'd make sense to have the appropriate staff capable of treating them. So, three guards this time, one of whom is definitely Yamato, definitely after the Uchiha incident then. Well that's partial success thus far.' As he was testing his sensor ability he noticed the signature outside his window leave. 'Guess Yamato noticed I was awake and is no doubt going to inform Sandaime-sama now.' He lets out another sigh, 'I really don't want to deal with jiji right now, but I guess there's no point putting this off forever, at least this way my change in behavior won't be too unbelievable.' He recovers himself after he shifts his pillow to support him as he sits up and waits for the Hokage to arrive. 'I'll have to get used to me not being Hokage again. Might as well set it up to look like I'm depressed right now so the other ANBU-san will report my behavior change.' Deciding on his course of action Naruto adopts a blank, emotionless visage and stares out seemingly at nothing. 'Spending all that time around Shikamaru and Shino is really going to help play this up.'

On the other side of the village in one of the many clan compounds Shikamaru was being rudely awakened by his nagging mother. "SHIKAMARU GET YOUR LAZY ASS OUT OF BED RIGHT NOW!" He lets out a loud, long groan. 'Ugh. Well at least I know I'm in a time when my mother is so troublesome. I should really get out of bed and get her off my back, but I really don't feel like moving yet.' He lets a small smile spread on his face. 'At least some things never change. I'm still as lazy as ever.' His thoughts take on a somber tone, 'I really hope Shino and Ruto are here as well or else this will be such a drag.' His thoughts are interrupted as his mother unceremoniously barges into his room and literally drags him out of bed. "You have 10 minutes to get dressed and cleaned up for the Academy before breakfast is ready. I expect you to be there!" Shikamaru let out a sigh before hastily agreeing to follow his mother's order. 'It's best not to give her reason to suspect I've changed.' He quickly throws on his clothes, a green mesh armor shirt, a grey short-sleeved jacket, and brown pants. 'Man, never thought I'd actually find myself wearing these again. Maybe I can find some way to change toward my new...old? Ugh this time travel stuff is so troublesome! Anyway, gotta find a way to change back into my clothes, with the exception of the shirt, these are just too light and flimsy for me now.' He quickly goes to the bathroom to complete his morning ablutions to make his way downstairs being careful to put a bored emotionless face on.

As he walks into the he has to catch himself before he let's his expressionless mask fall for there before him are two of the most important people of his life, 'Though I'll never let mom now that. Well at least not right now,' but he had lost them both before and now here they were. Alive. Dad making breakfast while mom reads the morning paper. He smirks internally, 'Glad to see you haven't changed old man, we'll have to play shogi soon.' Letting out a loud yawn getting his parents attention, "Morning kaa-san, tou-san."

"Hrmp. I'm surprised you actually showed up on time Shikamaru." He pretends to ignore his mother's remark as she continues to read through the newspaper, but he noticed the slight smile that appears on her lips.

"You're too troublesome to ignore in the morning." His father's mumbled reply doesn't go unnoticed by either of them.

"What was that dear?" Asked his mother in that sickly-sweet tone that threatened violence, quickly back pedaling to get back in her good graces, "I said it's too troublesome to have meetings so early in the morning. It leaves barely any time to enjoy a meal with my family." Shikaku let's out a satisfied sigh at this quick thinking hoping its enough to get her off his back. 'Troublesome woman. But at least she's my troublesome woman.'

"Aww that's sweet you want to spend time with us dear, but you know duty must come first as unfortunate as that is." Satisfied that he's safe Shikaku merely grunts in acknowledgement. Shikamaru finds the entire exchange amusing, 'I really missed being here with them both,' as he tries desperately to keep from smirking at his mother knowing no good will come of it.

Shikaku places breakfast in front of him and his mother before continuing his charade, 'Although it does help I actually do have a meeting this morning or else Yoshino-chan might actually kill me,' 'Sadly I have to go. Hokage-sama insists on these early morning meetings for some unknown reason. Not like anything major has come up since yesterday's meeting.' He lets out a sigh as he pats Shikamaru on the head and gives his wife a kiss before replacing his wife's apron with his vest and slipping into his sandals. "Hope you don't have a troublesome day like I do."

"Shogi later old man?"

Shikaku lets out a chuckle. "Sure kid, so long as you're content to lose again."

"Troublesome." After finishing his breakfast, being sure to wash and put away his dishes before his mother has to nag him more, Shikamaru dons his own sandals and makes his way out of his house towards the Academy. "Bye kaa-san." "Time to see if I'm alone or not. Please be here troublesome blonde." He begins walking in his usual lackadaisical slouch to meet up with Choji before the Academy.

In another clan compound Shibi stood over his still sleeping son whose insects had begun to act strangely, being concerned for his son Shibi sent one of his own insects to communicate with the colony to make sure everything was alright. He had a mission today so would not be assisting his son in his morning training. After a brief moment his kikaichū returned and informed him of a moment of slight distress in Shino during his sleep but that he had sense returned to normal. Satisfied that his son was not in danger Shibi left as silently as he had appeared and returned to morning routine.

Not long after Shibi left Shino began to stir from his slumber. 'It would appear that Naruto-san succeeded in his efforts if my physical size is to be any indication.' After considering what he remembered of his childhood he eventually determined that he was a year away from graduating, sadly that also meant that his brother Torune was already in Danzō's possession. 'No matter. This time around I will be able to save you nii-san.' Shino got up to begin his morning routine. Compared to life at the Nara compound the Aburame was one of complete silence. Walking out into the common room of his parents' home found both of his parents already dressed and preparing to depart for work. Not a word was spoken as they each silently nodded toward each other to continue their day. While this behavior might seem odd to others it was quite normal for Aburame to communicate in this manner. After his parents had left Shino set out preparing a small breakfast for himself and his kikaichū. Once done Shino set out for the Academy to greet his friends and begin to make plans to change their collective future.

It didn't take long for his jiji to make his way to the hospital and walk into his adoptive grandson's hospital room. His face had been set in a perpetual frown since he was forced to resume his position as Hokage after the unfortunate loss of the Yondaime Hokage. As he opened the door to his grandson's room and saw the look on his face however, his own face seemed to fall into an even deeper frown. 'I didn't think he'd be this despondent over this, did something else happen I wonder?' Removing the pipe from his mouth, "Good morning Naruto-kun. How are you feeling today?" Remembering he had to play his part Naruto forced a small smile to grace his face, it was made easier since he actually was happy to see Sarutobi again.

"Jiji." It came out almost as a quiet whisper and it seemed to confirm the tired Hokage's fears. "What happened this time jiji?" The old man let out a tired sigh before he began to explain how Naruto had ended up in the Hospital this time.

"It appears Naruto-kun that the shop owner where you were trying to buy your groceries forced you out the door. Evidently he failed to notice the merchant's caravan as it was passing by and you ended up being trampled by the man's horses before the merchant could stop." A brief moment of remembrance flashed across Naruto's face. 'Ahh yes I remember now. I was trying to buy something that wasn't ramen and the shopkeeper threw a fit. He seemed so infuriated that I would dare buy proper food.' Steeling his face back into his emotionless stance he made sure his voice reflected his condition.

"I see." It was cold, distant, and devoid of the usual excitement from the resident prankster.

This was not the reaction the old man had expected from his young charge and his concern grew greatly at the lack of life he saw in the boy. Taking another puff from his pipe that had long since burned out but was habitual and brought some comfort. "Thankfully, Naruto-kun, you weren't injured too badly, and the doctors have told me you are free to leave when you wish." Naruto resisted the urge to snort in disgust at the mention of the hospital staff. 'My arm could be cut off and spurting blood from the wound, and still they'd say I was perfectly healthy and shove me out the door as quickly as possible. Although this is very convenient the fox-hunt on my 11th birthday was one of the worst attacks I went through as a child. If memory serves the trampling occurred in early August so in two months I can complete the change without so much notice, jiji will be concerned after this but a few weeks of pretending to be happy again and he'll be none the wiser making the final 'break' so believable'

"That's good I was actually looking forward to school today and Iruka-sensei would be upset if I had to miss yet another day of class." Lying to jiji was hard, but it was necessary. Spending the time it took the Hokage to get here thinking, Naruto came to a revelation that was hard to accept and only contributed to his broken disposition. If he and his friends were to have any chance of succeeding in making the future better...there was absolutely no way they could ever tell the Hokage. To do so invited unwanted attention. No, the Hokage could never know how much has changed and that his Naruto died as soon as I came back. While he trusted and loved his jiji...he couldn't trust the Sandaime Hokage as the two would always be in constant conflict with each other.

Sarutobi Hiruzen stood staring at the blonde boy lying in the hospital bed as he stared into the nothingness before him. 'I have failed you greatly Minato. Try as I might it just seems I am unable to give Naruto any semblance of a happy life. I pray your wife will be merciful when I meet you both in the Pure Lands.' "I'm glad to see your instructors take such an interest in your education Naruto. It warms this old man's heart to know that the Will of Fire is being passed on to the next generation." He let out a tired sigh as he walked toward the blonde child and ruffled his hair, "I have to go back to work now Naruto-kun, but perhaps later we can get some ramen together?"

Naruto forced the biggest smile he could muster to appear on his face, but he made sure to close his eyes he knew his eyes would never be able to hide his emotional distress before he spoke in a louder voice than before, "RAMEN! Of course! I'd love to get ramen with you jiji!" The old man didn't buy for a second that the boy had bounced back to his usual self but at least it was closer to how he usually was.

He let out a series of chuckles before he turned to leave, "Be sure to get to the Academy as quickly as possible Naruto-kun no doubt Iruka-kun is worried about you, and you've already missed the first two periods but if you hurry you should be able to make it before the third ends." With that Sarutobi exited the room and once the door was closed he left out a long-tired sigh trying to figure out how his village could keep ignoring the Yondaime's wish to see Naruto as the hero he was. His troubled thoughts would plague him as he returned to his office to face his greatest nemesis, paperwork.

Once the Hokage left Naruto tuned back into his senses following him as he left his range. Deciding that it was time he got going he turned his thoughts toward Shikamaru and Shino and hoped beyond reason that they had arrived with him, or else he was in for a very lonely second life. Getting dressed in his kill me orange jumpsuit, 'I'll really need to go clothes shopping and soon this eyesore brings back nothing but bad memories,' Naruto made his way out of the hospital doing his best to tune out the hateful glares and spiteful comments and proceeded toward the Academy.

As he reached the building he proceeded to make his way to Iruka-sensei's classroom, 'This is it...the moment I find out if I'm alone or not,' letting out a sigh he opened the door and walked as quietly as he could into the room. Despite his efforts to remain unnoticed it was inevitable that Iruka would notice him. "So glad you could join us Naruto, why don't you take your seat?" Iruka's tone was hard and reproachful.

Naruto tried hard to not let the pain he felt in his heart make it to his face at his favorite sensei's apparent lack of knowledge of his stay in the hospital, "Apologies Iruka-sensei it won't happen again." Naruto quietly made his way to the back of the classroom sending subtle glances toward Shino and Shikamaru. Shino was his usually unreadable self, but Shikamaru was in his 'I was worried about you, but it'd be too troublesome to let others know that' mood. This gave Naruto some hope that at least Shikamaru was here. As he made his way back to his seat he thought he heard Sakura say something to him, but Naruto wasn't paying her any mind as he silently sat down and turned his direction toward the blackboard as Iruka-sensei resumed his lecture.

Naruto's silent ascent to his seat didn't go unnoticed by the entire class but aside from Shino, Shikamaru, and Iruka-sensei nobody particularly cared about the blonde's sudden change from a loud boisterous child to a reserved quiet one. As Iruka resumed his lecture on the Third Great Shinobi War, his thoughts were plagued by concern over what prompted such a change in Naruto. Before he knew it the third period was coming to an end and it was time for the students' lunch break before beginning the taijutsu portion of the day. After he dismissed his students for the hour and told them to report to the practice field out front when they had finished their lunch Iruka hastily made his way out of the room determined to find out what had happened to Naruto.

As the rest of the students followed Iruka-sensei out the classroom to take advantage of and enjoy their lunch break Shikamaru, Shino, and Naruto hung back. Shikamaru was pretending to be asleep which nobody, not even Choji, bothered to check, Shino silently took out a bento his mother had prepared earlier for him and began to eat in the solitude of the classroom enjoying the rare opportunity to appreciate the silence, and Naruto continued to stare blankly at the blackboard as if nothing else in the world existed. After the last student had left and the door had firmly shut Naruto extended his senses making sure that they were alone, in reality he was looking for Hinata who was undoubtedly going to be a huge problem in the near future as her crush and subsequent 'admiration from afar' was going to make things harder. Satisfied that they were alone Naruto stood up and moved to sit right next to Shikamaru. Shino who had been silently observing the duo moved to sit on the right side of Naruto while Shikamaru got up from his 'nap.' They all continued to sit silently dreading the coming moment, hoping that everything they had seen and done so far was a sign that they were all who they were supposed to be but dreading finding out in the event they had been wrong. As if a silent command had been issued each of them opened their mouths at the same time and uttered a single word.

"Kurama."

Upon hearing his two closest friends in the world utter that name Naruto immediately grabbed them both in a side hug and brought their heads into a crushing embrace despite his severely weakened body. "I'm so glad you both are here -tebayo."

"Heh. You haven't said that in years, you sure must be happy to see us." Naruto merely squeezed harder at his friend's taunt. Shino tapped Naruto's arm asking for release. While he did not begrudge Naruto his joy, and indeed shared in it, he was having difficulty breathing.

"Naruto-san you really must relax your grip. Why you ask? It would be an extreme waste to have gone through all this only for you to suffocate us before we even got a chance to work."

Releasing his hold on his two friends he turned to Shino with wide eyes, "Shika am I crazy...or did Shino just try to tell a joke?" His eyes widening in disbelief and mischief.

Shikamaru who was equally as surprised, "Yes Naruto you are crazy," Naruto 'hrmpled' at the insult, "but Shino *did* just try and tell a joke. You really need more practice Shino that was more akin to one of Sai's 'jokes.'" Shino merely silently contemplated his friends' words and decided that later he would search the library for a few books on 'humor.'

Naruto allowed a true smile to spread on his face, "Now that we're all here we can start working on 'Operation: How to make the future infinitely better than the one we left!'"

"You're just as bad as your father at naming things...at least this one doesn't take three minutes to say." The shout of indignation from Naruto brought a smile to Shikamaru's face and even Shino allowed his lips to twitch upward in a rare show of emotion. One thing was certain the future they left would never come to pass or they would die trying to change it.

Well that's it for chapter one. I hope you enjoyed it. I hope to have the next chapter out soon but that'll depend on how easy writing goes for me and whether or not people think this story is any good, although I'll probably continue it regardless because I just can't bring myself not to finish something I start even if I just have to end it lamely by having Zabuza kill everyone. If I continue this I would probably benefit greatly from a beta reader so let that be known! Again constructive criticism is welcomed.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

A/N: Been told text is pretty wally at times and yeah I know. Any other way I've tried to write just doesn't feel right to me but I'm working on it. Nothing else to really say here. Still don't own Naruto though!

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Chapter 2 – The Academy, Plans, and Training

"Now that we know we are us, we need to start planning what we want to change." Naruto took a break from eating part of Shikamaru's and Shin's lunch, not having time to prepare one or have one prepared for him. "Thanks for the food by the way guys, I left the hospital before they bothered to try and shove that slop they call food on me."

"Don't worry about Ruto. Anyway, I think at some point we'll have to tell someone what we know. We may have had power and influence when we're from, but right now we are children. There's only so much we can do this way and we're going to need a way to funnel information to people who can change things." Naruto, deciding he had taken enough of their lunches, sat back in his seat to think about who they could trust with their status as time travelers and at the same time believe them.

"We must also be careful about how much we try to change. Why you ask? Because the more changes we make the less reliable our knowledge of the future becomes. Therefore, we should focus on changing major events that directly impacted the war." Two quick nods of agreement were enough for Shino to return to his lunch while the group thought on what to do.

"As much as it pains me to say it we absolutely cannot tell the Hokage. I love jiji, but his second reign as Hokage has been one dismal failure after another. One need only look at what's been allowed to happen to me and the Uchiha to understand that and that's just the tip of the iceberg." Shikamaru considered his words carefully, truthfully, he had been considering telling the Hokage as he was one of the more logical choices and in a direct position to make necessary changes. 'Still there's some truth to Naruto's words. So much has been allowed to happen on his watch. As troublesome as it is I guess we can't go to him...at least not yet.'

"Well then what about my father? He's been the jōnin commander for awhile so he's well respected and liked by most of the shinobi forces, he has the Hokage's ear, and it'll be pretty easy for us to convince him. We can either reveal some knowledge that academy students shouldn't and wouldn't know, or I can show off some of my family's more advanced shadow jutsu which he hasn't taught me yet. It's a real drag but we should be able to get him to keep quiet about it...of course if we can't I really don't feel like killing him to keep our secret. Tsk. Troublesome."

Naruto pat Shikamaru on the back a few times, "We wouldn't kill your father anyway Shika, not after coming back specifically to save him and the others that matter to all of us." This got a small smile out of Shikamaru. "I think we can trust Shikaku, how about you Shino?" Shino looked to be running over scenarios in his head as he contemplated what he remembered of the jōnin commander before giving a nod.

"Shikaku-sama is an acceptable choice."

Naruto crossed his arms and began nodding his head and speaking in his Kage voice, "It's settled then we'll tell Shikaku, but not right away. If he doesn't believe us and decides to do something foolish like try to drag us to Ibiki," he turned to glance at his friends, "it would be better if we could at least restrain him until we can convince him." He got the biggest and cheekiest grin on his face that his companions knew could only mean one thing...Naruto was excited, and only one thing made Naruto *THIS* kind of excited. "What that means for us is its time to train! You two shouldn't have any problem getting back to where you were over time. Me on the other hand, it's going to be a long painful process. I really should've started chakra control exercises by the time I was five, but since nobody remembers the Uzumaki clan and wanted nothing to do with me it didn't start till my first 'C' rank mission. It'll be strange for us to be training together in public, so we'll have to find someplace else where we can be together or just train on our own...but I'd rather not be left alone right now."

"We can meet up at my clan's training ground, its isolated enough as it borders the Nara forest, and nobody usually goes near there. Just don't go waltzing into the woods neither of you are welcome yet." Neither was offended at their friend's blunt words. It was well known that the Nara's forest was forbidden to anybody who wasn't a Nara or a trusted friend of the clan, and if you entered without permission to forest reacted, usually aggressively.

"Alternatively, we can meet at my clan's compound. Why you ask? Most Aburame keep to themselves so we would not be intruded on, and most of the village avoids us due to our connection to our insects." The last part was said with as much sadness as an Aburame could convey through the constant emotionless tone that seemingly never leaves them.

"The rest of the village may look down on your family's bond with insects Shino, but I certainly don't!" Rather than grab Shino in one of his trademark hugs, Naruto gently laid his hand on his shoulder, "Your clan's insects are a great asset to this village and we should be grateful that the Aburame clan is here to keep them from running rampant. If people knew what uncontrolled kikaichū would do I have no doubt they'd sing a different tune about your family." Shino nodded at the words as Naruto removed his hand, while Naruto has always thought highly of the Aburame clan he has never expressed that admiration aloud.

"I think the best thing to do would be to mix up where we train. We should also start hanging out more to draw less attention to us being together." This is the part of their planning that Naruto was uncomfortable with, the last he wanted to do was subject his friends to the harsh treatment of the villagers merely by being associated with him. Shikamaru noticed as Naruto began to chew on his bottom lip.

"It's too troublesome to think we aren't going to let people know we're friends Ruto. We're in this together, and I meant what I said when I told you that you wouldn't go through this alone again." He watched Naruto nod his head slowly as if unsure of himself and felt an ache in his heart for his Hokage, "Why can't they see Naruto as the hero he is? He certainly isn't a demon. He would've destroyed this village ten times over by now if he was. Troublesome villagers!"

"We would follow you to a battle with the Shinigami to help you Naruto-san. Why you ask? Because you are our friend, our most trusted comrade, who has always put those he cares about above himself. So now it is our turn to put you above ourselves. It would be illogical for you to protest." Naruto at this point was trying not to let tears fall out of his eyes, 'Stupid child body being so emotional. Shinobi aren't supposed to show emotion.'

He sent a small smile toward his friends, "You guys are the best." If the room had been full of the usually boisterous class neither would have heard him, but in the silence afforded the moment it was clear as day.

"It's settled then we'll start training and hanging out after school at one of our compounds." One look at what Naruto was wearing set Shikamaru on another course, "Naruto we really need to get you out of that orange monstrosity." 'My Hokage will not be wearing kill-me-orange!' The look in his eye promised trouble for Naruto.

Naruto knew his jumpsuit would come up eventually and while he liked orange, 'It's the coolest cooler in existence after all,' he didn't like to be bathed in it. A shinobi color it was not, but it was impossible to acquire the suit Jiraiya had bought for him during their training trip. "It's not like I really want to wear this thing Shika, it's just the only thing they would sell me, and it still cost me a fortune!" He didn't mean to raise his voice he just couldn't help himself.

"I know it's not your fault Ruto," he stood up to wrap his friend in a comforting hug, "I'm just saying we need to get you back to looking like a proper shinobi. On our next off day from the Academy we'll go shopping." 'That should give me enough time for the other part of my plan to work.'

"Naruto-san are you still able to make use of the **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Shadow Clone Technique)**? Why you ask? Because it will exponentially increase your training in chakra control and the sooner you start the better off you will be in the long run."

Naruto hadn't actually considered if he could still make shadow clones. Unwrapping himself from Shikamaru's hug, he brought his hands together in the cross seal he used for the jutsu. "**Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!**" He didn't shout the name as he so often did in his youth. A large cloud of smoke appeared as did nine Narutos. "Looks like I can still make them, but my control is definitely lacking. Using as much chakra as I did to make these nine I could have easily made thirty, and I was only trying to make three in the first place." Naruto groaned at how poor his control was and began cursing everybody from the Hokage to the Academy instructors for not bothering to know anything about the Uzumaki clan and how badly they needed chakra control exercises early. Shikamaru found the whole thing amusing and smirked as he watched his friend angrily pace back and forth shouting about this and that. Eventually Naruto dismissed his clones and sat back down, "Well at least we know I can still do it, and it will make training a little easier at the very least. I'd go to the library to look up some more chakra control exercises if I didn't think I'd be thrown out immediately." Another dejected look spread across his face.

Shikamaru and Shino figured they'd just have to accept that for the immediate future Naruto will probably be depressed easily and it'll be up to them to pull him out before he starts falling. "While Shikamaru goes shopping for new clothing I shall go to the library to look for new chakra control exercises that you can use Naruto-san. Why you ask? Because I will assist you in bettering yourself in any way I can."

Shikamaru looked toward Shino and indicated that now was the time to discuss the other part of their plan. "Ruto," recognizing the change in Shikamaru's tone Naruto turned his face toward his lover? Friend? 'Are we still lovers even though we're kids? GAH! Time travel is so confusing. Whatever he's still my friend...we can sort out the details later!' "Shino and I think it'd be best if you move in with one of us eventually. Obviously, we can't just show up with you and say 'Hey kaa-san, tou-san Naruto here is moving in with us!' but both of us refuse to allow you to live in that apartment for any period longer than necessary." Seeing that Naruto was about to protest, probably intent on refusing saying something like 'That will just create more problems for you and your family!' "Neither of us care if it'll create problems for our families, and once either one of our families sees how you live Naruto they're not going to care either." He reaches over faster than Naruto can stop him and lifts up his jacket and shirt revealing his malnourished frame. "No child should be allowed to look like this Naruto!" He let his clothes cover his friend again. Shikamaru figured he could probably wrap his hand around one of the ribs near Naruto's lungs. "Don't even try to be troublesome! You *WILL* be moving in with one of us in the near future and if you even think of protesting I promise I will make you regret it!" The tone is his voice left no room for argument and as Naruto turned to look at Shino he saw that he had removed his sunglasses and was staring intently, daring Naruto to challenge them on this.

He turned to face forward again and let his head and shoulders slump in defeat "Fine. I won't cause a fuss over this."

He felt Shikamaru throw an arm over his shoulders and pull him closer, his tone and gaze softened considerably at the submission in Naruto's body language, "We care about you Ruto. We didn't know how bad things were with you the first time around, and we're not about to let you go through it again. Tonight, you and Shino are coming over for training and dinner, okay?" Shikamaru almost didn't notice Naruto nod his head in agreement. A silence fell over them as Shikamaru quietly held Naruto close to him. Doing his best to overcome his own discomfort, Shino laid his hand on Naruto's shoulder. Naruto turned his head and sent a small smile and a silent 'thank you' to the bug user.

They didn't make anymore plans during lunch instead just sitting silently, although Shikamaru never let Naruto out of his embrace and Naruto made no move to leave it anytime soon. He would've stayed there all day if he didn't feel some of the students beginning to return. "The others will be back soon." Nodding his head Shino got up from the seat next to Naruto and returned to his own. "It'll be different this time Ruto. Better even. You aren't alone anymore so don't think you have to be alone." Shikamaru removed his arm from around Naruto as Naruto moved to return to his own seat.

Nothing more was said as the students began to return from their lunch break. The once quiet classroom became loud as the students started talking, or yelling in some opinions, awaiting the return of Iruka-sensei. A few minutes after the last student had returned to class, Iruka-sensei walked in and using his trademark big head jutsu got the rambunctious class to settle down. He sent a sideways glance towards Naruto and his expression softened as he thought of what he had learned of his favorite, secret of course, student. During the lunch break he had gone to the Hokage to discuss Naruto's lack of boisterousness and learned that the boy had just gotten out of the hospital which is why he was late to class. 'I should really apologize to him for the way I spoke to him this morning, maybe treating him to ramen will cheer him up.' He smiled thinking of Naruto but got lost in his own thoughts. Of course, the students took advantage of this and once again began talking, albeit quietly, amongst themselves once again. Iruka finally snapping out of his ramen filled daydream, "SHUT UP YOU BRATS!" It was this shouting that had dragged Naruto out of his thoughts as Iruka began his next lesson.

'Man, I need to focus better. I didn't even realize everybody was back, and there's no way I wouldn't have heard the Sasuke fan club return and start marveling over how 'hot' the Uchiha was.' Just thinking of Sasuke put Naruto into a foul mood, a frown made its way onto his face as his

features hardened noticeably and he began to try and bore holes through the traitor's head with his heated glare. Thankfully Naruto was in the very back, so his mood went unnoticed by everybody except Iruka and Shikamaru. Both who were concerned about the blonde's stare but for entirely different reasons. Iruka thought that Naruto was merely engaging in the rivalry the blonde seemed to feel toward Sasuke; while Shikamaru knew that Naruto was thinking about what he should do to stop Sasuke.

Shikamaru leaned back in his chair as he often did in his youth, 'This is going to be troublesome. We'll have to address it sooner rather than later.'

Iruka began droning on about the **Henge (Transformation)** and **Bunshin (Clone)** techniques and their various applications in the field. Shikamaru and Naruto weren't paying attention at all. Naruto was still glaring intently at Sasuke while Shikamaru just didn't see the use of either of these techniques in the field. 'Unless you're Naruto and thus your transformation is a physical one and not an illusion than neither one of these are useful in the field. The first gust of wind will disrupt the **Henge** as the illusion wouldn't respond naturally, and the **Bunshin** is even more useless! The only one of the 'Academy Three' that is actually useful in the field is the **Kawarimi no Jutsu (Substitution Technique)** and we wouldn't learn that till next year. Tsk. I can't believe the standards for the Academy actually dropped this much. I know it's 'peace' time and there's no need for wartime standards but this is just pathetic!' Shikamaru's thoughts were interrupted as a piece of chalk hit his head. "Shikamaru stop sleeping in class! And Naruto pay attention!" Satisfied that he had sufficiently chastised his two students who muttered apologies, Iruka returned to his lecture on how to properly mold their chakra to execute the techniques. Shikamaru and Naruto still weren't paying attention but at least they were staring at nothing toward the blackboard.

Naruto sent a glance toward Hinata who he sensed kept glancing over in his direction, 'Really need to deal with her and soon. Problem is she has no self confidence so no matter how gentle I am in rejecting her she's going to spiral and so much of her confidence is already predicated to me.' His expression turned thoughtful and remorseful as he returned his gaze forward. 'I'm sorry Hinata. You're a nice girl but sadly I was just never interested. Even if I wasn't gay I have too much to focus on now to start a new relationship.' His thoughts turned toward Shikamaru as he thought of his own confusing relationship with the lazy genius. 'Really we shouldn't even engage in any relationship either...but I just can't help myself around him sometimes.' He lets out an internal sigh before he smirks to himself, 'it's just troublesome.'

While Naruto was thinking about other things Iruka-sensei finally finished his long-winded lecture and the rest of the period was spent as the class learned the necessary hand seals and began to practice each technique. When it was finally Naruto's turn he walked down toward the front and made the necessary sequence, Dog - Boar - Ram, as he said the name of the technique and transformed into a near perfect replica of Iruka. "Well done, Naruto. Now the clone jutsu." Naruto sighed, already knowing that he wouldn't be able to pull this off with his current level control. As his transformation was physical it took more chakra thus enabling him to perform it successfully, but the clone jutsu took so little chakra it was near impossible for him to do. Even after years of honing his chakra control Naruto could never make less than 100 clones. Naruto formed another sequence of hand seals, Ram - Snake - Tiger, as three overcharged clones flopped onto the floor. At his failure the class, with the exception of Shikamaru and Shino who understood why Naruto struggled with this jutsu and Sasuke who couldn't be bothered as he was fantasizing standing over Itachi's dead body after his glorious defeat by Sasuke, laughed in his face and began shouting how Naruto was an idiot. Iruka-sensei silenced the class but did nothing to reprimand them for their behavior. "That's alright Naruto. You are just starting with this technique and its can be difficult for kids your age to channel enough chakra into it, but it will get easier with practice. Go ahead and return to your seat."

Iruka's words were meant to comfort Naruto but they had the opposite effect only showing how little anybody actually cared about Naruto to be bothered to think that it wasn't a lack of chakra that was the problem but an overabundance of it. 'I have Kyūbi sealed within me for Kami's sake! I will *NEVER* lack for chakra!' Naruto sat down as he continued observing the rest of the class go through the lesson. Nobody else commented when other students were unable to execute a **Henge** or a **Bunshin**. Naruto spent the rest of the period staring out the window trying not to let his hurt show. 'It's so much harder the second time around now that I know what the problem is.'

Thankfully the period ended not much longer after his turn, "Alright class head out to the practice field for taijutsu practice." Iruka turned to walk out of the classroom while the rest of the students began to follow out after him.

Naruto hadn't noticed that the class was leaving until Shikamaru was standing next to him nudging his shoulder to get his attention. "Come on Ruto its time for taijutsu practice. Let's go enjoy watching our classmates beating each other up." The thought made Naruto's face brighten as he hopped out of his seat. Shikamaru waited for Naruto to get up and silently followed behind Naruto standing slightly to the left and a fraction behind him as if he was guarding the blonde.

As they made their way to the practice field, "I hope I don't have to fight the Uchiha today Shika, I'm not sure I can stop myself from pounding his smug arrogant ass into the ground. Idiot never uses anything but the Uchiha style of taijutsu. It's good but it's so dependent on the Sharingan to be effective, only reason he's such a 'genius' is because aside from the clan children nobody actually takes their physical training seriously."

Nodding his head in agreement with his assessment of Sasuke's style, "Well if it comes down to it Ruto what will you do? You know he delights in making himself look and feel superior to everybody to feed his own ego, and if you do fight him and win you know you'll have to deal with his troublesome fangirls who will cry over their precious 'Sasuke-kun'." Shikamaru's impressive imitation of the Sasuke fan club was spot on as far as Naruto could tell but he did note the 'Sasuke-kun' was riddled with disgust.

"I honestly don't know Shika. Losing would be easiest but I just can't stand that bastard. I know in this timeline he hasn't fucked us all...yet. But I just can't forget what the selfish bastard did."

"Well I'd recommend losing. Its troublesome, but its also the least troublesome." Naruto thought about it before deciding he agreed with Shikamaru and nodding his head.

"Hopefully I just won't have to fight him."

They reached the practice field a little later than the rest of the class but not so much that Iruka-sensei or Mizuki-sensei noticed. 'Oh right, Mizuki. Going to have to take care of him again, hopefully Iruka-sensei won't get hurt this time.' "Alright class you know the drill, girls will go with Mizuki-sensei today while the boys will work with me." With that the class divided itself, 'Just more evidence that the Academy standards have fallen. Not like our enemies are going to care if they're male or female.' Shikamaru was careful to keep his lazy slouch as he meandered over toward where the boys would be sparing.

Naruto went and stood near Shino who gave a slight nod in greeting as Shikamaru continued to follow behind Naruto before moving over toward Choji. "Hey Shikamaru, chip?" He grabbed a chip before flopping down on the ground planning to 'nap' until his turn.

"Thanks man! This is going to be such a drag." Choji chuckled, "I hope I don't have to fight you Shikamaru." Shikamaru nodded his agreement

before he closed his eyes to catch up on some sleep. 'Have to maintain appearances at least for now.'

Unfortunately, Shikamaru and Choji once again found them in the arena against each other. Choji raised his hand after they took to the center, "Sensei can I forfeit? I don't want to hurt my friend." Shikamaru lazily smiled at his kind-hearted friend.

Before Iruka could even reply Shikamaru turned around to walk back where he was, "It'd be too troublesome to fight anyway." He promptly plopped back down on the ground intent on getting in some cloud watching. Iruka let out a sigh and declared Choji the winner. Naruto smirked at Shikamaru's display as Choji walked over and sat down next to his friend.

Naruto stood silently with Shino as Iruka proctored each round until it was Shino's turn, "Good luck Shino." Shino nodded in response before walking into the center of the ring to stand before his opponent, one of the civilian kids Naruto doesn't remember the name of. 'Probably didn't make it past the jōnin-sensei's test. Should be no problem for Shino either way.' He was right as he casually observed Shino trounce his opponent. Shino's taijutsu was never that strong but the other boy obviously didn't have a grasp of the Academy's taijutsu style and exhausted himself trying to get through Shino's defense. He nodded toward Shino congratulating him for his victory.

As the rest of the class went through their spars Naruto became painfully aware of what was going to happen as name after name was called until Iruka-sensei announced the pairing he had been dreading, "Uchiha Sasuke versus Uzumaki Naruto." Naruto sighed and trudged into the center of the ring not looking forward to this match. At hearing the match up Shikamaru sat up to look at his blonde with concern. Not concern that he'd be hurt, concern that he didn't know what Naruto would do and that could be bad for Sasuke.

Sasuke stood in the center looking smug and smirking at the blonde assured in his own victory; he was after all an Uchiha, an elite. Naruto saw his smug superior expression and wanted nothing more than to shove it into the dirt as hard as he could. Making up his mind on what he would do Naruto waited for Iruka-sensei to start the match. Iruka raised his hand in the air and brought it down in a smooth quick motion, "Hajime!" He took a few steps back to clear completely out of the circle. Immediately after Iruka began the match Sasuke started, as he always did, by lunging at Naruto with an outstretched fist hoping to strike his shoulder. Ordinarily Sasuke would be too fast for his opponent to dodge, but Naruto was not the same as he was now. He dodged to the side and aimed for Sasuke's elbow hoping to take advantage of his overextension and eliminate one of his arms. Not used to Naruto being able to dodge him Sasuke wasn't prepared to counter his counter and ended up getting hit, much harder than he remembered Naruto being able to but still not that hard given Naruto's body was working overtime to counteract years of malnutrition and neglect. His arm was still usable, but he'd have to be more careful from here on out. Once his lunge ended he immediately went back on the offense throwing a series of punches and kicks toward Naruto. He was landing solid hits, but Naruto was managing to dodge or parry much more of his strikes than he used to. This served only to enrage Sasuke at the thought that somebody was possibly better than him. As Sasuke got angrier and angrier the match became easier for Naruto. 'Sasuke always got sloppy when he was angry.' As Naruto kept dodging and parrying Sasuke's attacks he began to smirk at the frustration of the 'last' Uchiha. Eventually Sasuke overextended himself again and Naruto promptly grabbed his wrist, flipped him around, and shoved a hard kick into his back forcing him out of the ring having positioned himself near the edge to eventually capitalize on the Uchiha's frustration.

Iruka had been shocked by Naruto's sudden improvement and even more surprised by his victory, "Winner Uzumaki Naruto."

While Iruka was declaring Naruto the winner Sasuke's fangirls, who had finished their own spars awhile ago as there were fewer girls in the class, were staring at the display shocked that the class loser dared to injure their Sasuke-kun. As the fangirls were fussing over Sasuke, Sasuke stood up and began glaring daggers at the blonde for humiliating him like this and vowing revenge. Naruto, ignoring the Uchiha scion completely, walked away and stood near Shikamaru and Choji. Shikamaru sighed, 'Troublesome blonde.' Though happy at seeing Sasuke lose and watching his fragile ego be bruised so easily, he dreaded the trouble this would undoubtedly cause for them later.

The remaining two matches went by without incident and Iruka announced that they'd be returning to class to finish out the day with a riveting history lesson. All the while Sasuke kept plotting revenge and glaring at the blonde who continued to ignore him, 'Where does he get off ignoring me?! He's not better than me!' Sasuke's annoyance at Naruto did not go unnoticed by his trusty fan club. Naruto wishing to avoid the impending confrontation with Sakura and Ino made his way back to the classroom quickly knowing they wouldn't act up in front of Iruka-sensei. Unfortunately, Iruka was asked to help one of the other instructors and left the class to self-study while he dealt with it. 'Great. Now that Iruka-sensei is gone they're no doubt going to demand I apologize to their precious 'Sasuke-kun,' as if its my fault he lost his composure in the first place. Well I guess it kind of is still he should know better than to let his emotions influence him, such occurrences get shinobi killed on the battlefield.' He pretended not to notice the pink haired girl as she glared at him, continuing to keep his eyes closed trying to will her to go away.

Sadly, it wasn't to be, and Sakura frustrated at being ignored started shouting right in his ear, "QUIT IGNORING ME YOU BAKA!"

'Man I forgot how loud she was back then...and people said I was a loud-mouthed brat. I really hope I wasn't that loud all the time.' "Haruno-san I would appreciate if you wouldn't shout right in my ear, its rude and unbecoming of a kunoichi to be so loud." As he moved to cover his ears trying to spare them anymore damage.

He called tell she was slightly unnerved at the apparent formality in which she was addressed although her other personality immediately overrode her calmer demeanor, 'Finally this baka is going to stop getting in the way of me and Sasuke-kun, CHA!' "Like I care what you think you idiot!" She practically sneered, "You need to stop annoying Sasuke-kun!"

Being sure to control his bubbling anger, "Oh? What pray tell have I done to annoy the high and mighty Uchiha-sama?" The sarcasm at addressing Sasuke as somebody who was superior wasn't lost on anyone but this only served to infuriate the pink-haired girl more.

"Stop disrespecting Sasuke-kun just because you're jealous he's better than you!" With each perceived slight toward the Uchiha her volume increased higher and higher.

"Huh, I seem to recall I won our last spar which would suggest that your 'Sasuke-kun' is not better than me." Sakura and Sasuke bristled at the slight and it was difficult to tell who was more offended of the two. While Naruto on instinct reached for his pouch to retrieve some ear plugs Shikamaru had given him one day. 'Right, he hasn't given them to me yet. Damn time travel.'

Don't think you can act cool just because you got lucky! He just underestimated you it won't happen again." Sakura was unaware that she had gathered the attention of the entire class as she continued to defend Sasuke and berate Naruto.

Deciding to pounce on the door she just opened for him, "Then it's his fault for underestimating his opponent. Such moments get shinobi killed! If he thinks the rest of the world is just going to fall down and lick his boot just because he's an Uchiha than he's not going to survive very long. The only thing his name is going to do outside this village is paint a target on his back either for somebody wanting to take his eyes or kidnap him to

breed their own Uchiha clan in their village! He needs to learn that while he is talented he is not the best. There is ALWAYS somebody stronger out there."

Sasuke, initially insulted at the perceived slight that someone was better than him, seemed to contemplate the blonde's words and found himself agreeing, but only so far that being an Uchiha would make him a target. 'As it should, I am an elite!'

Sakura on the other hand was inflamed and reached out to strike the blonde as she often did. However, Naruto had other plans and quickly grabbed her slow-moving fist, twisted her arm around her back while placing one hand behind her head and slamming it down on the desk. "I would appreciate it if you would stop trying to strike me Haruno-san." Neither she nor the rest of the class thought the blonde would ever stop her from beating him over the head as she so often did. "Might I suggest you return to your seat and resume your self-study as Iruka-sensei instructed?" At that he let her up and waited for her reaction, for a moment he thought she was going to try and hit him again before she seemingly thought better of it and moved back to her seat and sitting down in silence. 'Well at least that's over, for now at least. No doubt she will complain to her mother about how I hurt her and her mother in turn will tell the other councilmembers and then I'll undoubtedly be hauled in before the council to explain myself.'

Seriously, why jiji ever allowed them this much power is beyond me. The fact that shinobi actually listen to their orders as if they're apart of the chain of command is infuriating. Why the hell would a *civilian* council have any authority over shinobi.' Naruto could tell Sakura was still fuming and figured by this time tomorrow a council meeting will be called, minus the appearance of the Hokage because even they dared not challenge his authority. Circumvent and manipulate, yes, but challenge? Never.

Iruka returned a few minutes after Sakura sat down and besides wondering why she appeared so angry was quite pleased to see his class behaving for once. He once more began his lecture on the Third Great Shinobi War and how it came to be. Naruto found himself disagreeing with the assessment that the war began because the smaller nations thought to capitalize on the weakness of the larger nations having just come through the Second Great War. 'They weren't trying to expand their borders, they were trying to get reparations for the fact that the Great Nations repeatedly used their lands as their battlefields while leaving their own territory relatively unscathed. What did they expect to happen when you cause the suffering of a neutral party and then promptly refuse to help them recover from their war?' He spent the rest of the day thinking about everything he had to work on and how to best go about it.

Before he knew it Iruka was dismissing class for the day, "That's it for today class. I look forward to seeing you all tomorrow."

Naruto waited until the rest of the class had left deciding to avoid the hassle of dealing with parents picking up their children and throwing disparaging comments his way, or worse. After sensing the last of the parents leaving with their children Naruto made his way out of the building to meet up with Shino and Shikamaru. "You guys didn't have to wait for me, I would've caught up eventually."

Shikamaru smirked, "and give you the opportunity to weasel your way out of tonight? No thank you."

"It was no trouble Naruto-san. Why you ask? Because we can discuss our plans for training this afternoon as we walk." Naruto knew that they just didn't want him to get accosted on the way to Shikamaru's place. Even if the villagers hated him, they wouldn't risk upsetting the Nara or Aburame clans by putting their heirs at risk. Though the rumor mill will undoubtedly be working in overdrive as news of the 'demons' association with two of the noble clans spread throughout the village.

"Well I don't know about you two but I definitely need to work on my chakra control so it looks like its back to tree climbing for me. Of course I'll do it the smarter way and not the way Kaka-sensei had us do it." It wasn't long after completing tree climbing himself that Naruto observed another jōnin-sensei have his students lay at the base of the tree to first get the concept of channeling chakra to their feet to stick properly before having them run up the tree. 'It's just like Kakashi-sensei to make things more difficult.'

"Control was never really an issue for me, but I definitely need to work on my capacity and endurance. My clan's shadow techniques really take a lot of chakra and if I'm easily overpowered by my target then I've done nothing but waste my chakra. Looks like I'll be joining you for now at least Ruto." He let a long sigh. Physical training was never his favorite activity though he knew Naruto lived for it.

"As will I. Our insects feed off a large portion of our chakra. It's why many Aburame do not typically use traditional ninjutsu. However, during my own experiments with Earth natured techniques I discovered it would be quite useful to be able to move my insects quickly and subtly to avoid detection by my enemies until they were upon them." Shino had developed a surprising number of uses for earth techniques with his insects and he was determined to get them back.

While sitting in class Naruto had a thought that he was reluctant to bring up, not because it was a bad idea, but because it would bring them in contact with someone who was very...youthful. "In terms of our physical development I had a thought that I think we should consider." They continued walking through town with Shikamaru and Shino flanking Naruto ignoring the glares and looks of disgust directed toward them, or more precisely Naruto. "If we can we should try and find Gai-sensei. I know he's very eccentric and is much too youthful most of the time, but the man knows physical training better than anybody in this village. Hell, maybe even the entire Elemental continent." The thought of voluntarily training with Gai was enough to make both of them shiver, but Naruto was right. Gai-sensei was the best when it comes to physical training. "Lee, TenTen, and Neji haven't graduated yet so we should be able to get a couple months' worth of training out of Gai-sensei, or at the very least have him help us develop our own regimen to work on by ourselves."

"I don't know if I'm willing to subject myself to his 'flames of youth' just yet Ruto but let's see how things go for now. We still have 4 months until the year ends before we have to make any decisions like that." Deciding to avoid discussing anything of a sensitive nature until they reached the safety of the Nara compound they walked the rest of the way in silence just enjoying each other's company in quiet, a luxury they haven't had for many years.

Naruto was the first to notice their stalkers, but Shino wasn't far behind when some of his insects reported to him. "It would appear we've gathered quite the crowd of followers today. Hinata, Sasuke, and Sakura. I know why Hinata is following us, or should I say me, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why Sasuke is following us, me, and no doubt Sakura is following after Sasuke."

"I told you this would happen if you beat Sasuke. Troublesome. Now we have to find a way to ditch them." Shikamaru briefly seemed excited at the thought of playing shinobi hide and seek again, but his joy was quickly crushed as he remembered that these were only Academy students and didn't have the tracking skills yet. 'Well Hinata does but its more stalking than tracking.'

Naruto got a grin on his face, "I think this is a good time to put Iruka-sensei's lesson into practice ne? What better way to lose our 'friends' than with liberal use of clones and transformations. Plus, it'll be good practice for us." Two nods, a side trek into a nearby alley, one cross seal, three clones,

and five transformations later found the group once again free from pursuers.

"We're fortunate Hinata-san did not have her Byakugan active. Why you ask? She would have seen you make your clones and transform into us thus revealing your skills before you are ready." The three barrels that had been sitting in the alley turned back into the three boys in a small puff of smoke.

Nodding his head in agreement with Shino "I'll have the clones lead them around for awhile before I have them dispel the same way they appeared." For aspiring shinobi it was quite disheartening that they could be fooled by a simple transformation into a trio of barrels that had no business being in that alley. Their followers were in for quite a shock when they seemingly lost track of their targets without warning.

After losing their stalkers they arrived at the Nara compound without incident. Shikamaru stepped onto the porch before shouting, "Kaa-san, I'm home! My friends and I are going to be training out near the forest, is it alright if they stay for dinner? We might be out for a while."

This immediately got his mother's attention, Shikamaru didn't often bring more than one friend back and definitely didn't have them stay for dinner. "Only if you actually bother to introduce me Shikamaru, you know I don't let strangers eat in my home!" Her voice seemed to carry from wherever she was and it was difficult to ascertain her exact location until one of the doors slid open, "Now who are your friends Shikamaru?"

"Troublesome. This is Shino," he gestured toward Shino who gave her a silent and very formal bow, "and this is Naruto." He pointed over his shoulder at the blonde who was trying to make himself as unnoticeable as possible.

Failing to escape her notice Naruto gave a formal bow as well, "It's a pleasure to meet you Nara-sama." Sensing her scrutinizing he looked up to meet hers with one of his own.

Seemingly satisfied with what she saw, she smiled "It's a pleasure to meet you both, Shino-kun, Naruto-kun. You're more than welcome to stay for dinner. Did I hear you say you would be training Shikamaru? It's quite unlike you to train...*voluntarily*. Not that I'm going to complain. Dinner's at seven like usual, be sure you wash up before then Shikamaru." Her stern yet warm tone promised pain if he didn't listen.

"Don't worry kaa-san I know the rules, we'll be back and washed up before foods on the table." Nodding her head she went back inside wondering when exactly she became friends with Shino and Naruto and why he suddenly decided to show up with them unannounced. It's not that Shikamaru didn't ever have friends over its just usually she knew before they showed up on her door. 'Oh well, Shikamaru is finally making more friends and is willing to train without being nagged perhaps those two will be good for him.'

Making their way toward the edge of the Nara clan forest they were once again left in relative peace. Naruto couldn't sense any of his ANBU guards around and was pretty confident that they weren't going to bother them anytime soon, no doubt reporting my new-found companionship with two clan heirs. "Before we start training I should tell you guys what's going to happen in a few months and before you try and say that it's a stupid idea, and I know it is, but it'll be the best way to completely toss away my hyperactive idiot persona." Seeing he had their rapt attention, "Two months from now during the festival celebrating the Yondaime's defeat of the Kyūbi I'll be confronted by a mob of drunks intent on 'finishing the job.'" Seeing that Shikamaru was about to protest, "I know what you're going to say Shika but it doesn't matter. It already happened and it just so happens to be one of the more serious times I was attacked but they won't do anything to kill me. This way I can start showing off more of my intelligence and skill. It's the best way to not arouse too much suspicion of my sudden improvement. If the Hokage thinks I've been hiding and acting the fool we'll be better off than him being suspicious that Kyūbi might be influencing me." Shikamaru couldn't argue with the logic but that doesn't mean he has to like the fact he has to let Naruto be put in the hospital again for this plan to work.

Shino on the other hand was less bothered by it as it seemed the most logical course of action and they are shinobi, injury is unavoidable. "It would also provide a convenient way to explain our increased presence in his life Shikamaru-san. Why you ask? Because if Naruto has been hiding his skill for some time he would need some way to explain how he had been practicing. That is where we come in. Our association with Naruto-san will provide a logical explanation for why he improved so fast compared to his early years at the academy. After hearing how he was injured by the villagers we would naturally be unwilling to let him be alone"

Naruto started liking Shino's plan more and more with each word he spoke, "And to keep you both from being harassed by the villagers for being friends with me I obviously worked hard to hide our relationship. Great idea Shino! It'd also be the perfect time for me to start 'moving in' so to speak Shika. You know to keep me safe."

"Troublesome. It's a good plan. I just don't like it."

Thinking on it though Naruto forgot a large part of why he survived was because of Kyūbi and with him indisposed at the moment, "Well Shika I may have a way to make you feel better. Sense Kyubi is unavailable at the moment there's no guarantee that I'll heal as quickly as I would, but since I've been in the hospital so much by now my lack of healing would also be suspicious. I'll have to try and come up with some way to make a stronger clone. One that can bleed and won't dispel after too much damage is done." Naruto got a far away look on his face already trying to think up a seal for the job.

"It's fortunate you decided to become so skilled in fūinjutsu Naruto-san. Why you ask? The complex art is quite useful at making the impossible possible." Naruto hadn't heard Shino as he began muttering to himself about the need for the seal to absorb a large portion of his chakra to feed into his clone, and perhaps some kind of summoning jutsu like Nagato's dog had where the more it was hit the stronger it became. Shino wasn't bothered by this at all knowing that once Naruto started thinking of seals he was lost to the world.

"Well Shino it would seem its just us. We should leave the troublesome blonde to his fūinjutsu and get to work on our own training." With a silent nod Shino and Shikamaru made their way over to one of the nearby trees before they sat down with their feet against the tree as they began channeling chakra to stick to the surprisingly smooth bark. "I'm glad Naruto told us about what he saw I don't know why the other jōnin didn't teach it this way. Frankly I'm surprised the Academy doesn't begin chakra control exercises like this. Even for people with normal or small reserves the earlier they start the more beneficial it is in the long run." Shikamaru and Shino held casual conversation as they continuously channeled chakra to their feet, the act of conversation making the task more difficult but also had the benefit of training them to multitask a useful skill for a shinobi.

Naruto eventually snapped out of his fūinjutsu fueled tangent and joined his friends in trying to stick to the surface of the tree. "Sorry guys I tend to get distracted when thinking of seals. On the bright side I have some ideas I'll have to try out later but they should be enough to make a clone strong enough to survive the encounter." They spent the rest of the afternoon casually talking about what else they'd have to work on as they trained their surface clinging ability. By the time it came to return for dinner they had each managed to climb to the top of the tree. "Now we can move on to 'advanced' tree climbin!." Naruto got a playful glint in his eye that promised trouble for Shino and Shikamaru.

Advanced tree climbing was tree climbing while some of Naruto's clones throw things at them. If you deflect with anything other than your hands you have to come down and start again. It's a great way to train ones evasion and deflection as well as forcing one to develop a better sense of their surroundings. "Somehow I think you're looking forward to throwing things at us Naruto."

A look of utter shock appeared on his face, "Shikamaru! I can't believe you think that I would enjoy causing you and Shino any kind of pain!"

"Oh shut up Naruto you know you look forward to having your clones pelt us with things. We're starting with rubber balls. I won't allow you to start pricking the both of us with senbon or kunai!" Naruto pouted and started muttering about 'stupid pineapple heads ruining all the fun.'

"We should return to your home Shikamaru-san. Why you ask? I do not wish to make a poor first impression with your father, and it would not be wise to anger your mother." Thinking of his angry and nagging mother Shikamaru could only nod dumbly.

"Come on guys we don't want to make my mother be anymore troublesome."

They made their way back to the Nara house well before dinner would be served. "Will your dad be there tonight Shika?" Naruto was curious about the Nara clan head, he had died long before he and Shikamaru had started their relationship and even though Yoshino had just met him he knew she wouldn't really care.

"It's hard to say, it depends on if he decided to go out drinking with Choji's and Ino's dads. But it he did promise we'd play shogi tonight so he'll probably show up." He heard Naruto snort in amusement.

"Of course the best way to get a Nara to do something is to bribe them with shogi." Shikamaru could only laugh at how true that statement was.

"We're back. We'll go wash up before we hang out in my room until dinner." Shikamaru's father was home and was busy making dinner. 'Well Shika did always say that his mom wore the pants in the family, just never thought it was true.' Shikaku took a moment to address the reason he had been forced to make even more food tonight for dinner.

"Who're your friends Shikamaru? Don't think I've ever seen you around with them before." Reading between the lines Shikamaru could tell that his father was interested, which could only spell doom for him later. 'Tou-san just loves to embarrass me in front of my friends.'

"It was too troublesome to bring them round before but since we were training all afternoon it would've been rude not to invite them for dinner. Anyway these are my friends Naruto and Shino."

Both gave a bow and greeted Shikaku as formally as possible. There was no need to tell him who was who as he was well aware his father knew exactly who they were. Shikamaru knew that his father would leave it alone for now...but he'd expect a better answer later. "None of that formality is necessary it's just too troublesome. You better go wash up, your mother should be back soon, and you don't want to make her angry Shikamaru."

"Yeah, yeah old man. We're going."

Shikaku snorted at his son, "Dinner will be ready soon. Good to meet you Naruto, Shino."

After washing off most of the dirt Shikamaru lead them to his room. It was quite different from the future Shikamaru's room and was a lot more barren. "Wow Shika. I knew you were lazy but to not even try to decorate your room?" Shino could only agree, even he had made his room his own space with the sparseness here you would barely know anybody lived in it.

"Decorating is troublesome. Anyway make yourself at home, I know its not much but it suits me." Naruto pulled out some ink and paper from seemingly no where and began designing the seal he'd need to make for his shadow clone. 'Barely even in the room and he's already working. Typical blonde.'

"Care for a game of shogi Shino?" Shino's silent nod was the only response he got as they both moved to sit at the shogi board. For the rest of time until dinner Naruto, Shikamaru, and Shino immersed themselves in their work and failed to notice Shikaku's call to dinner. As Shikaku opened the door to his son's room the sight amused him. Shikamaru and Shino were deep into a game and it looked like neither side was able to make any headway. This raised his opinion of the Aburame as not many people could provide his son with a suitable challenge. What really surprised him was the blonde in the corner of the room surrounded by pages and pagers of calculations and strange designs. He didn't understand what it was supposed to do but he recognized fūinjutsu when he saw it. From what he had heard Uzumaki Naruto wasn't the brightest bulb in the box so to see him so engrossed in his work made him question just how accurate those statements were.

"Shikamaru. I called you to dinner five minutes ago. You know how your mother gets so let's go." He had gained his son's and Shino's attention however Naruto remained oblivious to the outside world, 'Heh. Like father like son. Minato couldn't put down a seal array until it was done either.' "The kid always like that?" As he gestured toward Naruto.

"Sorry dad didn't hear you. Yeah he always gets like that when he works. Hey Ruto," Shikaku watched as his son went and knocked the blonde lightly on the head immediately breaking the trance, "dinner's ready."

Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, "Sorry Shika I got caught up again didn't I?" Shikamaru merely snorted at his question. The whole exchange was scrutinized by Shikaku wondering just when his son and Naruto became close enough to have nicknames for each other, and just why did Shikamaru decide to hide this relationship from him.

Shikaku walked back into the kitchen and started setting food on the table as his wife sat patiently waiting for their son and his friends. He watched more closely as they came in taking note of how they entered. With Naruto being flanked by the both of them as if they were guarding him. "Thank you for letting me stay for dinner Nara-san, Nara-san."

"Call me Shikaku there's too many Naras to keep it from being troublesome." Naruto nodded in understanding before taking the seat directly next to Shikamaru while Shino took the one across from him. 'Interesting.' Shikaku went back to putting food on the table before taking the seat across from his wife. With a chorus of "itadakimasu" all around they each began to serve their own food and eat. "So, Naruto, Shino, how long have you two been friends with Shikamaru?" It seems the uncomfortable part of the meal had arrived. No doubt Shikaku is puzzled by what little he's seen so far, and nothing intrigues a Nara like a puzzle.

"We've been friends for a couple years now. We met a few years after we started in the Academy." It wasn't really a lie they had been friends for

years and it did start well into their time in the Academy, but it wasn't exactly the truth either. Shikaku noted that Naruto had answered for the both of them and Shino only nodded in agreement after he spoke. Not atypical for an Aburame to just agree silently if they had nothing else to contribute.

"I see."

Naruto, having learned to speak Nara, understood that Shikaku was curious as to why Shikamaru had never brought them up or over before now. "You should be more forward in your questions Shikaku-san. No doubt your aware of my reputation in the village."

Shikaku continued to look at the blonde with a blank face, inside however he was surprised that Naruto had picked up on his mannerisms 'Just how long have you two really been friends?'

"In order to spare Shikamaru and Shino any trouble from associating with me, we worked very hard to keep it a secret."

Shikaku understood perfectly. "So why now then?" Not even bothering to question why Shino never answered but filing the information away, 'Clearly whatever is going on Naruto is the leader here and they'll both follow him.'

"That's a rather complicated answer Shikaku-san." Yoshino was surprisingly silent through the whole ordeal. Ordinarily she'd be pouncing on them and her son demanding to know everything but sensing her husband's mood and intentions she just continued to eat silently focusing on the conversation as passively as possible. "I suppose the simplest reason is I got tired of pretending to be something I'm not. No doubt you saw what I was working on and it just doesn't add up with what you've heard about me." Shikaku nodded waiting for him to continue, "I don't know why the village hates me, but I do remember anytime I displayed any kind of intelligence the hatred seemed to grow. I was regularly thrown out of class at the Academy when I answered a question correctly and in great detail because, apparently, I was disrupting the class. So how best to make people feel comfortable around me?" To say Shikaku was surprised at people disliking intelligence would be an understatement but he still didn't say anything waiting for Naruto to finish his own explanation. "The easiest way I found was to pretend to be an idiot. As soon as I started answering questions incorrectly or just flat out not trying because 'I didn't know,' things at the Academy got marginally better. The instructors delighted in pointing out how stupid I was though they were sure to. I took to being a loud-mouthed prankster in order to both ease my mounting frustration with my situation and to draw attention away from my intelligence. In hindsight, some of the pranks I pulled off should have been great indicators of how smart I was, but people tend to overlook the obvious." As he finished his explanation he briefly paused to take a few more bites of food. "As for why Shino never came up I suppose its because we all understand that Aburames tend to prefer silent company to social interaction and socializing can sometimes make them uncomfortable around those they aren't familiar with."

Shikaku continued to nod no longer surprised that Naruto would be the one answering any questions. "Am I to understand then that you two are responsible for Shikamaru's sudden decision to voluntarily train?" Naruto smiled.

"Truthfully that's a recent development," 'and it was, "we mostly just hung out and enjoyed each other's company. Shikamaru is the perfect friend really. Most things are too troublesome to actually bother him, and Shino is remarkably social by Aburame standards, no offense intended Shino," Shino nodded indicating that there was no offense taken at the statement, "he's just more selective in who he associates with."

Shikaku turned contemplative as he thought over everything he had heard about Naruto and trying to associate it with the boy sitting at his table, and nothing he had heard added up to this Naruto. But neither could he detect any blatant lies from the boy, just a nagging feeling that he isn't being completely truthful. "Well then I suppose we can expect to be seeing more of you two in the future?" Three nods were all he received as they continued to devour the food before them. 'Glad I made so much food and knew there was an Uzumaki here, growing boys are already a bottomless pit and the Uzumaki were practically Akimichi in their appetites.' "Good, if you can make my son do some proper training than I'd be eternally grateful." Shikaku smiled as he heard his son groan about not being that bad, he was sure to note the amused smirk Naruto sent to his son and the slight blush that seemed to tinge on his son's cheeks after he noticed. 'Interesting indeed. Just who are you to my son Uzumaki Naruto?' They enjoyed the rest of dinner in relative silence other than the usual small talk made about school and work.

Shikamaru stood up before Naruto could continue to clean up the table after they were finished, "You're a guest here Ruto there's no need for you to clean up." The reproachful tone seemed to force the blonde back into his chair as he gave a soft smile. Shikamaru continued to clear the rest of the table before setting the dishes in the sink.

"Thank you again for allowing me to stay for dinner Nara-san, Shikaku-san." As soon as Naruto stood up Shikamaru and Shino moved to follow him. "It's late and I should really be getting home," he paused and gave Shikaku and Yoshino a deep bow, "thank you again for your hospitality." Shino mimicked his actions though remained silent.

"It's no trouble, and if I knew all it took to get Shikamaru to do some work was have his friends do it for him I'd have invited Choji over more often. You're both welcome back anytime." Naruto seemed to light up at the news that he'd be welcome back, 'Just how much has happened to you to make you this happy at this simple declaration Naruto?'

"I'll take care of the rest of the dishes after I walk Naruto home kaa-san, no need to trouble yourself with it." Yoshino was positively stunned at her son's statement figuring she'd have to do it, 'and by that, I mean make Shikaku do it. Damn lazy husbands and sons!' Yoshino and Shikaku continued to sit in silence as the boys put their sandals on before calling out a final goodbye and leaving the house.

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"So how much of that did you buy Shikaku?" As soon as the boys were out of ear shot they delved into the conversation they had had with Naruto about their son.

"I found it very enlightening. There's a lot more to Naruto than I thought possible," he paused briefly to sip some more tea, "but they're definitely hiding something. All of them; and whatever it is Naruto is at the center of it. I trust you noticed how he was in control of the conversation and how they both deferred to whatever he said."

"And how Shikamaru was walking Naruto home, but not Shino, and I supposed 'escorting' is the more apt term judging by the way they walked out of here." Shikaku nodded his head at his wife's assessment. "Do you think we should go to the Hokage about this? The boy is clearly hiding things...who knows what else his hiding and I'd hate to think he'd be hiding anything relating to *that*." The 'that' they were speaking of was unmistakable.

"I don't think we should go to the Hokage just yet. From what little I gleaned from our conversation the boy is as yet still unaware of his burden,

and if he's lying and has been in contact with it then there's not much we can do to make him tell us. I don't think he's being influenced by it though, if he was no doubt we'd have noticed some trouble out of him. And I don't mean the pranking kind of trouble. I trust you saw his face when I said he could come back?"

She gave a solemn nod, "Just how bad must his life be to make him that happy at something like that? I know the Hokage turned down all attempts to adopt the boy for fear of granting any clan more power, but I'm starting to wonder if that was really the thing to be worried about at the time."

"Whatever the case he and Shikamaru are undoubtedly close. As far as I know he's never allowed anybody other than Choji call him 'Shika.'"

"Even then Choji doesn't call him Shika around other people knowing how much Shikamaru values his privacy." Both were thinking intently on the enigma that Naruto was.

"Whatever the case is I'll get to the bottom of what exactly is going on with the blonde. It'll be troublesome, but I don't think I have much choice." Yoshino smiled knowing a Nara with a puzzle was like a dog with a bone and he wouldn't rest until he'd buried it.

"You should probably start at the Academy, if they're sabotaging Naruto like I have no doubt they are who knows what else has been compromised because of that? Whose to say the other children haven't been affected by the instructor's hate?"

Shikaku turned angry at the thought that the instructors might be sabotaging the entire class because of their stupidity. "I'll get to the bottom of the business at the Academy Yoshino don't you worry. Think you can get with the other women and find out what you can?"

Not willing to pass up the opportunity to torture her husband, "Why Shikaku I hope you're not insinuating that all I'm good for is gossiping with the other wives?"

"Of course not! I just know that you spend a lot more time with them than I do and it's quite common for mothers to talk about their children, isn't it?" She couldn't resist smirking at her husband enjoying the look of panic that came across his face. Sipping more of her tea she let her husband recover from the near panic attack. "At any rate we should both keep a better eye on Uzumaki Naruto. As much as I hate thinking this way, he's a very valuable asset to the village and it'd be devastating if the village drove him away." Shikaku could only nod in agreement not trusting his mouth not to get him into more trouble. "Why are women so troublesome?"

Meanwhile...

"So how'd you think it went Shika?" Naruto was currently being 'walked' home by Shikamaru and Shino.

"I think it went better than expected. You definitely lit a fire under my dad. I hope you realize he isn't going to stop digging till he gets all the answers he wants." The streets were fairly empty at this time, most either enjoying dinner or other time spent with their families. It was one of the few times Naruto got to enjoy the peace the village afforded its inhabitants.

"He wouldn't be a Nara if his intrigue wasn't piqued. I admit though I hadn't planned on making him interested in me so much so soon." He rubbed the back of his head and groaned, "I really need to stop getting lost in fuinjutsu. I become so oblivious. In any other circumstance I would've sensed him approaching and cleaned up."

They were getting closer to his apartment building, "In any case Naruto-san you will have to be careful from this moment on lest you draw attention of Hokage-sama. Shikaku-san most likely will not discuss your changes with the Hokage right away but it's inevitable that it will come up. Why you ask? Everything about you is always scrutinized. It will not be long before rumors or reports make their way to the Hokage about your friendship with us."

Naruto nodded in tune with Shino, "My ANBU guard wasn't with us the whole rest of the day. I'm sure the Hokage already knows I was hanging out with you two. It won't be long before they're ordered to observe my interaction with you and your families." It really hurt knowing that the Hokage was concerned enough to spy on his every moment, but not concerned enough to keep him safe.

They got to Naruto's apartment building and made their way up the stairs chattering about the training they'd undergo for the next couple months. The scent of fresh and wet paint assaulted Naruto's nose as they reached his floor. Already knowing what he'd find he ignored the still dripping paint and the anger he could feel from his two friends as he opened his door. "Naruto-san I must inquire as to why you do not lock your door. Why you ask? Because it is illogical to not keep those who would harm you out."

Naruto's behavior didn't betray any of his frustration, "Not long after I moved in the lock mysteriously broke. I informed the landlord who assured me it'd be taken care of as soon as possible and since it's been 7 years I assume he hasn't found the time. Once I took to repairing the lock myself and when I returned the later that day the lock was once again broken, and I had a bill for damages done to the exterior of the building which I am not allowed to alter under the terms of my lease."

"I see." Naruto ignored the buzzing of Shino's kikaichū that indicated his frustration.

"In any case if you two have your way I won't be here for much longer so there's really no point in trying to change things. It's getting late and you both should get home, even within the walls you can never be too safe. I'll see you both tomorrow." Waiting until they both made their goodbyes to him and each other he watched as they walked down the stairs and in opposite directions heading toward their respective compounds. Finally closing his door, ignoring the still dripping 'DIE DEMON' painted on it, Naruto made his way to the bathroom for a cold shower and to go through his evening ritual before climbing into bed and drifting off to sleep.

I'm surprised to see myself updating so soon but I just couldn't help myself and had the urge to write. Hope you enjoyed this chapter, bit longer than the last. Next chapter will have some more time at the academy, the impending fox hunt, and Shikaku being a nosey fawn. Won't be spending a whole lot of time as a pre-genin cause I got places they need to go and people they need to see and probably kill!

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

A/N: I maybe should have split this into two chapters, but I didn't want to. It didn't feel right.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

I'm afraid negotiations have broken down. I still don't own Naruto.

Chapter 3 – Day of Days

Naruto was not having a restful sleep. Plagued by dreams of his past failures, he couldn't find a way to get his mind to stop replaying it over and over.

"Sasuke. Wha...what did you do?" The despair in his voice at what his friend, the person he once thought of as a brother, had done was impossible to contain. For behind him was the still burning remains of the village. Naruto could still sense a few people still alive in the raging inferno, but they were being snuffed out quickly. His anger began to bubble to the surface. "Why!? Why did you do this?!"

"Isn't it great Naruto! Now we can start again. A village where nobody has to suffer. It will be pure." Sasuke was giddy with glee at the prospect of achieving his ambition of creating a place where an incident like what happened with Itachi would never happen again. Where children weren't forced to kill their families for the sake of those ungrateful for their sacrifice.

"Start again? With what?! With who? You've destroyed EVERYTHING!" All Naruto could think about was everything that had happened since Sasuke rejoined the village. Sasuke had just married Sakura making her dreams come true. Baa-chan had managed to retire and name him Hokage. Everything was fine as he left for the latest Kage summit. He never expected Sasuke to turn around and destroy everything around them.

"They were unclean. They spat on the many sacrifices made so that they could enjoy this 'peace' they had." It wasn't hard to figure out that Sasuke was referring to Itachi. Despite the shinobi being aware of the former Uchiha's actions the rest of the village was left in the dark for fear that the knowledge of the planned coup and subsequent extermination would fracture the stability of the village. The war had just ended, and they were in no position to drop such news on a weary populace. If they couldn't trust that the many clans would protect them, or that the Hokage would protect them, then things were doomed to fail. So Itachi's name had to remain slandered, at least publicly, for the time being.

"I see now." Naruto steeled himself for what he knew he had to do. "Everyone kept telling me not to trust you, but I refused. Too stubborn to see the truth." His heart ached at the decision he had made wishing it hadn't come to this but see no other option. "The village was never the problem, you were!"

Sasuke obviously didn't want to hear that he had done anything wrong. "You were the problem! If you hadn't attacked the village that day than my family wouldn't be gone! Itachi wouldn't have killed them. All of this is YOUR fault!" Something in Sasuke had finally snapped. All the burdens, lies, and pain that plagued his life seemed to be catching up with him and he was determined to lash out at everything that caused him to suffer. Its what he always did, until he destroyed it and looked for a new target to destroy. He did it to Itachi, Orochimaru, Danzō, Obito, Madara, and finally Konoha.

Naruto didn't hesitate any longer. He immediately activated his chakra cloak and rushed at Sasuke with a **Rasengan (Spiraling Sphere)**. Sasuke was not caught off guard by his speed as Naruto had hoped and activated his partial **Susanoo** to block the attack and sent a **Susanoo: Kobushi (Fist)** toward Naruto. Naruto unable to dodge the first that had appeared so close to him had no choice but to take the full force of the attack and got blown a good distance away.

Shino and Shikamaru who had been waiting for Naruto to decide what to do joined in while Sasuke was focused on Naruto. "**Doton: Doryūsō (Earth Style: Earth Flow Spears)**." Earthen spikes exploded from the ground around Sasuke, they were unable to pierce through the **Susanoo**, but they weren't meant to. "**Hijutsu: Mushidama (Hidden Technique: Beetle Sphere)**." Shino had sent his swarm through the spikes and had them explode out of their makeshift hive to try and devour the chakra of Sasuke's **Susanoo**. He responded by activating his **Entenka (Flame Wrapping Fire)** which began to consume Shino's insects in the black flames of **Amaterasu (Heavenly Illumination)**. Not willing to risk his entire hive Shino withdrew what insects he could but left enough to try and develop a resistance to the black flames hoping to be able to breed a resilient hive.

Meanwhile Shikamaru had been using the shadow created by the condensed bug sphere to use his **Kage-Kubishibari no Jutsu (Shadow Strangulation Technique)** to wrap a shadow hand around Sasuke's throat. Shadows are wondrous constructs. They can go through anything so long as light passes through it. Unfortunately, Sasuke had enough chakra to overpower him and break free of the oppressive shadow. "Tsk. Troublesome traitors."

As Sasuke was dealing with Shino's insects and Shikamaru's shadow, Naruto had formed three **Fūton: Rasengan** that rotated around a larger one and began to charge toward Sasuke once more hoping to shred his **Susanoo** with his modified **Wakusei: Rasengan (Planetary Spiraling Sphere)**. Not willing to risk his attack shredding his partial defense Sasuke activated his full **Susanoo** and tried to knock Naruto away with one of its arms. Unable to dodge and concentrate on the technique at the same time Naruto canceled his many **Rasengan** and made a **Kage Bunshin (Shadow Clone)** to alter his trajectory out of the way of the massive chakra construct. His shadow clone took the brunt of the hit and the memory Naruto got after it dispelled was enough motivation to not allow himself to be hit by the construct too many times.

Touching down back on the ground Naruto created a shadow clone and they both paused briefly to immediately gather nature chakra. Naruto

switched to his tailed beast transformation enhanced with his own nature enhanced chakra to add to Kyūbi's chakra and waited for Shikamaru and Shino to join him within the cloak before he moved to engage the completed **Susanoo**.

His clone began running through hand signs shouting, "**Senpō Mokuton: Shin Sūsenju (Sage Art: Wood Style: Veritable 1000-armed Kannon)**." A large wooden statue rose out of the ground with the shadow clone Naruto standing on its head as a thousand arms began to sprout from its back and moved toward Sasuke's position. Clone Naruto began to engage Sasuke with his wood construct while the transformed Naruto backed off to begin channeling a **Bijūdama (Tailed Beast Bomb)**. Clone Naruto formed his left hand into a half-ram seal and extended his right palm down to be parallel to the ground. "**Senpō: Mokuton: Raigō: Senjutsu (Sage Art: Wood Style: Raigō: Thousand Hand Strike)!**" Immediately all 1000 wooden fists began to fly toward Sasuke's **Susanoo**. Naruto doubted they'd do any real damage, but it would distract Sasuke long enough to channel a suitable **Bijūdama**, and it also served to force Sasuke away from the village with each strike. 'Must be careful not to damage the village any more than it already is.'

Shikamaru and Shino were waiting patiently for an opportunity to strike, knowing that even a small power can turn the tide of a battle if used at the right moment. Shino kept sending insects to interact with the still burning black flames having no luck with any developing a resistance to the all-consuming fire. While Shikamaru was trying to find an opening they could exploit.

Sasuke was getting irritated at the wooden construct that was forcing him back. No matter how many fists his **Entenka** burned away, more seemed to form to retake their place. The shadow clone was quickly burning through the chakra it had been created with by using the technique and knew it wouldn't be long before it ran out of chakra and the statue turned inert and he dispelled in a puff of smoke. Sasuke knew he couldn't risk absorbing the senjutsu enhanced attack with his **Rinnegan (Samsara Eye)**, Orochimaru's curse mark allowed him to use nature energy but it helped him balance and control it and without it, it was too grave a risk. Hoping to speed the process of making the clone disappear along, Sasuke jumped high into the air and taking advantage of the time it would take for the wooden fists to chase him, began to channel his chakra through his **Susanoo**. He conjured a longbow and an arrow made entirely of lightning chakra. He let the arrow fly toward the shadow clone, and though the **Indora no Ya (Indra's Arrow)** was nowhere near as powerful as it had been when he had used it with all of the bijū's chakra, it began to eat through the wooden appendages that moved to protect the clone Naruto. Faster than the arms could move to shield him the shadow clone Naruto ended up being pierced by the massive lightning arrow and immediately dispelled as the wooden construct began to collapse.

In the time that was happening the original Naruto had managed to finish channeling his **Bijūdama** and was aiming at where Sasuke was going to land, hoping to deal the most damage by trapping Sasuke in the epicenter of the explosion. "Shino use your insects to try and blind Sasuke. I know he can sense the amount of chakra I'm channeling, but I'll take whatever advantage I might be able to get. Shikamaru if this works it should shatter his **Susanoo** be prepared to hit him with your **Kage Nui no Jutsu (Shadow Sewing Technique)**. As soon as the shockwave hits I'm going to charge him regardless of whether the **Susanoo** is gone, make sure you enhance the chakra you have sticking to me or you'll be blown away. I wish we could get him further away from the village to spare it the shockwave, but it can't be helped. I cannot allow him to escape and possibly destroy another village." No more words were exchanged as Shikamaru and Shino prepared themselves for the next round. Shino raised his left arm and sent out a massive swarm of insects determined to follow Naruto's orders even if he must sacrifice his entire hive.

As Sasuke began his dissent to the ground Naruto shot the **Bijūdama** toward him as Shino's insects moved to block his vision. He could still sense the massive ball of compressed Chakra flying toward the spot he would land, but the **Indora no Ya** took a massive amount of chakra on top of the already massive requirements for a complete **Susanoo**. Not to mention that Sasuke had to expend considerable chakra to destroy the village. He knew he was nearing his limit. He resigned himself to the fact that he'd be unable to dodge in time to avoid the worst of it, his only choice was to maintain his **Susanoo** to have any chance of surviving. 'Tsk. The dobe's lucky I expended a lot of my chakra already crushing that village.'

Naruto watched as Sasuke landed right where he thought he would. He marveled at the detonation of the **Bijūdama**. No matter how many times he saw it, caused it, it still managed to take his breath away. 'It's a pity Deidara wasn't around for the war. No doubt he would've admired the destructive power of such 'art' As the shockwave exploded away from the epicenter of the blast Naruto, using as much chakra as he could to push against it, began to make his way toward Sasuke's position. 'With any luck the bastard's dead. Or at least out of Chakra.'

As they neared the epicenter of the explosion, Naruto seeing no sign of Sasuke's **Susanoo** dropped his Kyūbi cloak. 'Thanks Kurama you can rest for now I shouldn't need your chakra for what's left.' "**Don't mention it kit, just be sure not to let that ningen live this time. I always told you your naivete would cost you.**" 'Now isn't the time Kurama. I'm not in the mood.' Naruto erected every mental barrier he could think of to silence the Kyūbi in his mind, having no desire to be reminded of how wrong he had been about Sasuke. He saw Sasuke panting heavily but seemingly unharmed. 'No doubt it took everything he had to survive. Always clinging to life.'

Seeing Naruto stalk angrily toward him Sasuke drew on whatever chakra he had left trying to keep himself from collapsing from sheer exhaustion. It wouldn't be enough to use any jutsu. 'Then I'll just go with kenjutsu and taijutsu.' He started rushing toward Naruto, Shikamaru, and Shino hoping to at least kill Naruto for getting in the way of his ambition like he always did. Shino unleashed the rest of his hive and sent it toward Sasuke determined to drain what little chakra was left. Shikamaru meanwhile began manipulating his shadow trying to skewer Sasuke's limbs hoping to immobilize him. Each of them was content to let Sasuke charge toward them confident that at this point he was no longer any threat to them.

The swarm Shino had released dispersed as quickly as it appeared intent on sending a few kikaichū in waves to subtly drain his remaining chakra. Shikamaru's shadow was considerably less subtly but Sasuke seemed to ignore it and kept charging Naruto. As he was about to reach Naruto, Shikamaru caught him with his shadow who promptly moved to immobilize him. "Always charging head first at your problems huh Sasuke? You always did ignore anything and anybody you thought beneath you. It's why you were always so weak." He knew the jab would hurt his pride but he didn't care.

Sure enough Sasuke seemed to fume at being called weak. "Not so weak that I couldn't destroy your precious village and everyone inside it." The spiteful sneer was laced with anger and hate.

"It doesn't matter anymore. You made sure to destroy everything that mattered. I really wonder if Itachi would still love the you you've become." Using his brother was a low blow but it didn't matter anymore and for a brief moment Sasuke looked scared at the thought but just as quickly as it appeared it vanished.

Sasuke may not have been able to sever their bond at the Valley of the End. Naruto did not have that same problem. Not anymore. Naruto stepped forward and ripped the Konoha hitai-ate off Sasuke's person. "Shikamaru release your shadow. Shino recall your kikaichū." They both looked at him confused as to what he was doing but obeyed nonetheless. Naruto reached into his back pouch and pulled out a soldier pill and tossed it to Sasuke. "Eat it. I won't have you complaining about how I was lucky you were weakened when you die." He looked toward Shikamaru and Shino. "You two return to the village and do what you can to quench the flames and find anybody still alive. I'll join you shortly." His tone left no mistake that he was ordering them to leave and would not tolerate any disobedience right now.

Sasuke had caught the soldier pill but had not yet crunched it. He was perplexed by the blonde's actions. 'Why would he give me this?' For all Sasuke's insults and taunts about his intelligence he knew Naruto wasn't stupid and never did anything without reason. Naruto began to stare him down waiting for him to consume the soldier pill. Planning to take advantage of the opportunity, Sasuke crunched on the soldier pill and began to feel his chakra replenish although it wasn't a pleasant experience and caused him significant pain in his weakened state.

Naruto waited patiently for Sasuke to recover enough and make the first move, confident that he could win this final bout. "You shouldn't have given me that soldier pill Naruto. Nor should you have sent them away." Sasuke seemed to ooze confidence at his returning strength. Naruto however did not look impressed or concerned. Continuing to stare down the last Uchiha, and now he really was the last Uchiha.

"A little extra energy will not matter in the long run, but I refuse to hear you complain about anything when I end you." Sasuke sneered at Naruto's confidence. It never mattered the situation, Sasuke always believed himself superior to Naruto and nothing had ever changed that. Naruto hadn't beaten him at the Valley of the End the first time, or the second time. Each time it was a stalemate and Sasuke had managed to walk away. However, unlike those times Naruto would no longer be holding back and trying not to kill Sasuke.

Feeling sufficiently recovered Sasuke activated his Sharingan and rushed Naruto to engage in close combat again only this time without the interference of those two. Naruto and Sasuke began to dance around each other neither one willing to make the first real move and risk it coming to an end. Naruto's senjutsu enhanced strikes partially negated the advantage Sasuke's **Sharingan** gave him as it greatly increased his threat range, but Sasuke's **Sharingan** better enabled him to anticipate and counter Naruto's strikes especially as he began to get accustomed to the increased range of Naruto's strikes.

They continued to participate in their dance before Sasuke leapt away from Naruto and formed the Horse seal as he channeled chakra toward his mouth. '**Katon: Gōka Mekkyaku (Fire Style: Majestic Destroyer Flame)!**' A sea of fire was expelled from his mouth toward Naruto. Naruto in turn formed the snake seal and he too channeled chakra toward his mouth as a massive wave of water exploded out in all directions. '**Suiton: Bakusui Shōha (Water Style: Exploding Water Shock Wave).**' The two techniques met in between them in an explosion of steam as it obscured their vision of each other.

Taking advantage of the steam created by their respective jutsu, Naruto began to form another sequence of hand seals, Ox - Snake - Ram. '**Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Jutsu).**' His plan was to neutralize the Sharingan by overloading its ability to see chakra. No where near as efficient at the silent killing method as a mist shinobi, Naruto quickly made his way toward Sasuke. Making use of Kyūbi's chakra to elongate his fingernails into incredibly sharp claws he began to strike at Sasuke from within the mist.

Sasuke knew he couldn't hope to blast the mist away with the amount of chakra Naruto had pumped into it. He deactivated his Sharingan and closed his eyes as he channeled chakra to his ears to better pick up the sounds of Naruto moving. Hearing the blonde moving to strike him from behind, he drew his katana and in one smooth motion plunged it into the blonde's chest as he channeled lightning chakra through it, paralyzing him in place. Seeing the look of surprise on his face he couldn't help but smirk. "Looks like I win again Naruto."

His smirk fell as he felt a sharp pain explode through his chest as he saw the clawed hand of his friend poking through his stomach. As he turned to look behind him he was surprised to see the blonde who should have been impaled on his sword. He looked back at what he had stabbed and was surprised to see it turn into wood. "A clone. I should've known. You always did send clones in first. Too afraid to attack yourself so you hide behind an army of clones."

Naruto extracted his hand from his chest. "It's much easier to deceive your opponent with a well-placed clone than to allow them to kill you. A fact you seemed to have forgotten. Though you never were one to listen to anybody's lessons unless they involved powerful jutsu. It would seem you also forgot Kakashi-sensei's most important lesson." No further explanation was needed. Naruto knew Sasuke understood that he thought of him as less than trash. Ignoring the blood Sasuke coughed up Naruto moved to stand in front of him and stared him down looking directly into his eyes as the Sharingan faded from sight. "You always did have to learn things the hard way, didn't you? I won't make the same mistake I made last time." As he spoke he placed his still clawed hand over Sasuke's chest where his heart was. "Goodbye Sasuke." He plunged his hand into his chest and violently ripped out his heart and continued to stare into Sasuke's eyes as the life finally drained from him and he collapsed on the ground. The look of complete shock and disbelief on Sasuke's face angered Naruto. It's as if he never even considered he might lose, that it wasn't even possible, or that Naruto would actually kill him. Naruto crushed Sasuke's heart and began to make his way back toward the village not sparing a glance at his fallen brother.

Naruto shot up into a sitting position on his bed. He was drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. It had only been three weeks since Naruto and Sasuke had had their final fight, and Naruto had been so focused on finding a way to fix it that he had never had time to reflect on the battle.

He stared down at his hand. He could still see Sasuke's heart as it quite literally stopped beating within his grasp. Kakashi's words kept resounding in his head, 'Those who break the rules are trash, but those who would abandon their comrades are worse than trash.' Naruto couldn't tell if he was trash or not. Sasuke had betrayed them. Destroyed their home. But he was still their comrade for better or worse, and Naruto killed him. Sasuke had to die for what he did. It was his duty as Hokage to prevent it from happening elsewhere.

A conflict was raging in his mind as he tried to justify killing Sasuke, and that he had betrayed him first thus negating whatever he owed Sasuke as a comrade in arms. His mind could rationalize it, but his heart ached. For the first time in a long time Naruto cried. His emotional distress at the whole situation finally catching up to him. His sobs grew louder and louder as he cried in the solitude of his apartment. It's a good thing he had no neighbors, or he was sure there'd be banging on his walls, floor, and door for him to shut up.

Eventually he got his sobbing under control, but he couldn't stop the tears from falling. No matter what he tried they flowed undisturbed down his whiskered face. After a few more minutes of hugging his knees to his chest and just crying he managed to stop his tears. 'I need Shikamaru.' Hastily getting out of bed, not bothering to throw on his kill me orange jumpsuit, he put on his sandals and made his way out of his apartment. As he turned to close his door he once again caught site of the 'DIE DEMON' that had been painted in a dark red paint. The tears threatened to begin anew remembering Sasuke's words before they had fought. 'They spat on the many sacrifices made so that they could enjoy this 'peace' they had.'

'Was Sasuke right?' His thoughts went to a dark place. 'I had been sacrificed for their peace from the Kyūbi and they spat on the sacrifice my parents made every chance they got.' Slamming his door closed he jump down to the ground. 'I need to get to Shika!' He jumped off the walkway outside his apartment not caring if he injured himself at this point. Naruto took off as fast as he could into the dark night of the new moon.

The streets were deserted this time of night. The only ones out were shinobi on night patrol, the ANBU, and those returning from missions. Doing his best to avoid drawing attention to himself he quickly made his way to the Nara clan grounds. Hopping over the wall that surrounded the entirety of the compound he immediately reached out his senses to find Shikamaru. Everything looked different in the darkness and stillness of the night. It

didn't take him long to hone in on Shikamaru's signature and he took off in a sprint toward his house. Not caring about ceremony or courtesy, 'It's already the dead of night my presence is rude enough,' he opened the door of the Nara home and made his way to Shikamaru's room.

He failed to notice Shikaku who was up late doing his own paperwork and dealing with mission reports. Shikaku however, noticed the distraught look on Naruto's face and let him go without much fuss. He hadn't expected to see a look like that on someone so young. He had only seen it on those who had survived the horrors of war and come back broken.

Naruto walked, practically ran, into Shikamaru's room and flung himself on the sleeping Nara. As soon as he had wrapped him in a tight embrace Naruto once again began to sob and wail at the pain in his chest.

Shikamaru panicked when he woke up with a weight bearing down on him. His first instinct was to reach for a weapon but found none in reach. As soon as he was more alert he realized it was Naruto who had him in a death grip and hearing his pained sobs he did nothing but return the embrace and squeezed as hard as he could. At feeling Shikamaru stir and hold him Naruto tightened his hold not caring if he cut off Shikamaru's ability to breathe, he just needed to be as close as he possibly could.

Yoshino woke up at the sound of loud crying, grabbed a weapon she kept stored in her room and ran out to find out what was wrong, intent on killing whatever dared threaten her family. Upon reaching the source of the crying, Shikamaru's room, she stopped when she saw Naruto crying on Shikamaru as her son held the despondent blonde. She just stood and stared at the duo. She eventually made eye contact with Shikamaru and managed to silently ask what was wrong. Shikamaru could only shrug indicating he had no idea. Shikaku eventually joined Yoshino silently at his son's door watching as Shikamaru tried his best to calm Naruto down.

Shikamaru gave his parents a look pleading them to leave them be. His mother looked ready to barge in and meddle, but his father merely nodded his head and closed the door ushering his wife to the sitting room where they would wait for Shikamaru.

Once they were alone Shikamaru set about helping Naruto. "Ruto?" His questioning tone only resulted in another pained sob. Shikamaru began rubbing his back in soothing motions as best he could. After spending at least 10 minutes doing this Naruto managed to stop crying, but Shikamaru could feel him sniff every so often. "Ruto, what's wrong?" Naruto's pained puffy eyes met Shikamaru's concerned ones as he stared into the dark eyes he found so much comfort in.

Wiping his nose with his arm. "I had a dream...about the fight." Shikamaru didn't say anything, waiting for Naruto to be comfortable enough to talk about his feelings. "I replayed the event in my mind, and when I woke up I just started crying. My heart couldn't reconcile what I did even though it needed to be done. I tried really hard to believe that I did the right thing! But now...now I'm not sure."

He climbed off Shikamaru and allowed him to sit up. He crawled in between Shikamaru's legs and leaned back into his chest as he felt Shikamaru wrap him in another hug. It made him feel safe. "Part of me believes that Sasuke was right. That the village did spit on the sacrifices so many made for them to live in peace." He didn't say anything else and Shikamaru wasn't sure how to respond. They sat in silence as Shikamaru continued to hold Naruto close. Naruto was going to wait and let Shikamaru collect his thoughts before continuing.

"They may have been guilty of doing that Ruto, but did they deserve to be killed because of it?" Shikamaru could understand where Naruto was coming from. Since he was a baby Naruto had been sacrificed for peace and the village never did a thing to help him as the instrument of that peace. "Was it right for Sasuke to burn everything to the ground and slaughter everyone for that? Even if the adults were guilty of belittling Itachi's and your sacrifice, what about all the children who had no idea who Itachi was or were unaware of the burden you were forced to carry all your life? Did they deserve to have their lives extinguished?" It was Shikamaru's turn to be silent as Naruto thought.

Naruto knew that Shikamaru's words had merit. There were many who had never done any wrong to Itachi or him, and many more who were too young to be aware of either of them. "So why does my heart still ache Shika?"

Shikamaru leaned back slightly. "Because Ruto, despite all the wrongs he did to you and everyone else, he was still your friend. In many ways you both had similar experiences." Naruto moved to sit across from Shikamaru with a puzzled look on his face. "Just as you were sacrificed by your father, Sasuke was by Itachi. Neither of you asked to be the tools that would bring the village peace, but you both were. Your father sealed the Kyūbi in you to protect the village and by doing so turned you into a hero. Itachi tortured Sasuke's mind to make him grow stronger and one day bring justice for the wrongs done to his clan. The fact that you were never seen as a hero for what you did or that Sasuke's clan had planned a coup is irrelevant. You were both instruments of hate the only difference is in how you handled it. Sasuke ran from the pain the hate caused, while you tried to push past it." Shikamaru watched as Naruto digested his words and felt relief wash over him as he saw Naruto relax a bit.

"Do you feel better now Ruto?" He watched as Naruto nodded his head and let out a big yawn. "It's too late to go back to your place, just crash here, okay? I'm going to go calm my parents down before they decide to do something drastic." Naruto mumbled out a 'kay' as he laid down and closed his eyes. Shikamaru waited until he was sure Naruto was asleep and wouldn't wake up when he left. Satisfied that he was out, Shikamaru made his way out of the room as quietly as he could to join his parents.

Shikaku and Yoshino were sitting, waiting for their son to finally emerge. Shikaku returned to his paperwork hoping to distract himself from the disturbing sight of Naruto apparently breaking down. From everything he had heard of the boy, Naruto never cried, and if he did he definitely didn't do it around others. 'Yet he had sought out Shikamaru tonight for a good reason.'

Yoshino was maintaining a calm exterior but deep down she was jittery. Her first instinct as a mother had been to wrap Naruto in her arms and make him feel safe. Not knowing how Naruto would react if she did was the only reason she hadn't intruded on them. He seemed to feel so safe in her son's arms. 'I doubt I could have done anything to make him feel better, but obviously Shikamaru could.'

After waiting for what felt like an eternity Shikamaru finally made his way out into the room. As soon as she laid eyes on him Yoshino pounced. "What happened?" Her demanding tone belied her obvious distress at Naruto's condition. Shikaku merely set his paperwork aside to stare at his son.

Shikamaru could only sigh as he moved to sit in the chair across from his dad. "He had a bad dream. He's sleeping now." Shikamaru knew neither one would be satisfied with what little information he had just given, but he couldn't tell them.

"That's it? A bad dream?" Yoshino was angry. She could tell her son was withholding. "Shikamaru boys his age shouldn't have nightmares so severe that they go running across the village to break into somebody's house!" She tried to keep her voice quiet, but it was difficult, she didn't like being lied to.

Shikamaru wasn't about to budge though. "I can't tell you about it. It would betray his trust, something I'm sure you can understand doesn't come easy to him. He doesn't trust either of you enough yet to tell you. Maybe one day he will." He sighed again and began to mumble. "I hope he will."

Shikaku and Yoshino stared long and hard at Shikamaru who met their steely gaze with one of his own. Seeming to accept that there was nothing they could do Shikaku nodded his head in understanding. "Will he be alright?"

Shikamaru shrugged his shoulders. "It's hard to say right now. His heart is playing tricks on his mind right now. Hopefully he'll be able to sleep through his thoughts without experiencing it again." Shikamaru stood up to go back to his room. "I'm going to go back to bed. Make sure he doesn't wake up alone. He doesn't do well when he's alone when he gets like this." He quietly made his way back to his room and was happy to find Naruto with a peaceful expression on his face as he slept. He moved to lay down on the futon next to Naruto and wrapped his arms around the little blonde. Instinctually Naruto moved closer into Shikamaru's comforting embrace and a smile made its way onto his sleeping face. Satisfied that Naruto would at least sleep through the night now, Shikamaru continued to stare at the sleeping blonde before he once again drifted off to sleep.

Yoshino and Shikaku watched as their son retreated to his room. "I'm concerned Shikaku." She turned to face her husband and wasn't surprised to see a thoughtful expression on his unreadable face. It wasn't unreadable to her.

"There's not much we can do Yoshi-chan. Not until he is willing to talk to us about it. We can't force it either. From what little I've gleaned from these ANBU reports about their time guarding him, Shikamaru is right. Trust does not come easy to Naruto and we can't afford to risk damaging the little trust we have managed to build with him." He leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. "It's troublesome but all we can do is continue with our current plan to find out more about what's going on in his life."

He turned to look at his wife. The look of worry never left her face, but she at least nodded in agreement. "It's late and you should go back to bed. I have more reports to read through." She got up to go back to their room and sleep. She paused and checked in on Shikamaru and Naruto and smiled when she saw that Shikamaru had wrapped Naruto in a protective embrace. Feeling her worry dissipate a little bit Yoshino returned to her room and fell into a restless sleep.

Morning comes and Naruto wakes to an unexpected feeling. Shikamaru is still holding him tightly to his chest. Naruto looks at Shikamaru's sleeping face and can't help but blush in embarrassment after remembering last night's events. 'I hope Shikaku and Yoshino aren't too troubled by my surprise visit.' Naruto decided to stay still until Shikamaru woke up, just watching him as he slept.

Something disturbed Shikamaru out of his slumber. A sort of sixth sense told him he was being watched. He didn't like being watched in his sleep. It made him think he was back in the war. He opened his eyes to be deep blue ones staring at him. "Hey. Morning Ruto. Sleep well?" He watched Naruto shake the cob webs from his mind snapping him out of his staring contest.

"Morning Shika. Slept much better. Thanks." He moved to get up and stretched trying to work out the kinks in his body. Sleeping with Shikamaru calmed him down and made him feel safe but it sure didn't help his body. "So how bad are you parents going to be this morning?"

"Not sure. My dad probably won't do anything." He knew his father would understand that you can't force somebody to open up to you. "My mother though...who can say what she'll do. You'll just have to prepare yourself for the worst." Yoshino liked to fix things when she found out there was a problem. 'And you are practically a walking problem factory Naruto.'

Naruto nodded his head in understanding. "Can't thank you enough for letting me stay last night Shika. My mind wasn't in the best place." He heard Shikamaru mumble under his breath but couldn't make out what was said. He assumed it was something along the lines of, 'It's no problem troublesome blonde.' Whatever it was it made him smile. "I should probably get over to my place though. Need to get ready and stuff."

"You might as well stay for breakfast. I have some old clothes that should fit you that you can borrow." The thought of having Naruto go back to his apartment right now made him nervous. Sure Naruto might be fine here, but once he gets back to his lonely apartment who knew what could happen. Shikamaru got up and stretched before he made for his closet and began digging trying to find his old clothes. Eventually he pulled out a pair of black pants, a white mesh armored shirt, and a black short sleeved jacket and gave them to Naruto. "No point in you having to rush through the morning trying not to be late. Shower's available if you want it."

Holding the offered clothes in his hands Naruto couldn't really refuse to stay. "Thanks Shikamaru, and I showered last night after I got home so I'm fine." He watched Shikamaru nod his head as he began pulling out his own clothes talking about how breakfast should be ready soon before making his way toward the bathroom, presumably to grab his own shower. Once Shikamaru had left the room Naruto began to remove his sleep clothes and put on Shikamaru's clothes. 'Can't believe I ran across the village in my boxers. Well I suppose it's not the most embarrassing thing I've ever done. Still it must've been quite a surprise when I barged into the Nara home. I'll have to apologize for my intrusion.' Naruto decided to wait here for Shikamaru to get out of the shower before braving the rest of the morning.

"SHIKAMARU GET YOUR LAZY ASS OUT OF BED AND COME DOWN FOR BREAKFAST!"

Shikamaru returned a few moments later shaking his head at his mother's shout. "Ready to head down Naruto?" He watched as Naruto nodded his head and stood up to head down toward the kitchen where they could already smell breakfast.

"Shikaku, dear, do you really need to make so much food? We're not feeding an army you know." Yoshino wasn't used to her husband cooking this much food. Shikamaru barely eats most of the time. Yet her Shikaku was cooking up all kinds of food. Onigiri, sushi, ramen, 'Ramen for breakfast. Really?' Yakiniku, dumplings, dango. 'If this is what feeding Naruto is going to be like perhaps we should start having more meals with the Akimichi.'

"You do realize we're feeding an Uzumaki this morning, right?" He sent a sideways look of incredulity toward her. "They're near Akimichi in their appetites. Then pile that on top of Naruto and Shikamaru being almost teens they need to eat, and if there's one thing I know about Naruto it's that he can eat." He snickered. "You should see the reports from the ANBU expressing their concern at the sheer volume of ramen he consumes in one sitting. The boy is definitely his mother."

Yoshino could only sigh in defeat at her husband's logic, but she saw more of Minato in Naruto than Kushina. "I know you know more about Naruto than I do, but from what little I've observed he seems far more like Minato than Kushina. I honestly didn't expect Naruto to have spoken the way he did last night. Just from his reputation around the village alone it's a stark contrast."

Shikaku put the last plate of food on the table. "It was unexpected. So much more than Shikamaru inviting two classmates I've never heard him speak of more than in passing." He set about to brewing more tea for him and his wife and set aside another kettle for the boys whenever they decide to come down. "As much as I'd love to interrogate all three of them to find out what's going on, after last night the last thing I want to do is risk pushing Naruto too hard. But I am going to find out what the hell is going on around that boy."

Yoshino was nodding her head in agreement to her husband's words. "I think you meant we are going to find out what the hell is going on, and so help me Shikaku when I do I'm going to introduce some people to some of our more 'creative' shadow jutsu." Hearing his wife speak of their more creative shadow jutsu in that sickly-sweet tone that screamed bloody murder made him shiver. Though Naras usually didn't practice torture techniques as they're too 'troublesome' both in using and dealing with people, they did have quite a few creative uses for their shadows in the field.

"Just try not to break them too badly dear. It'd be troublesome having to explain to the Hokage why my wife is on a killing spree. Deserved or not." "Man I am glad she is never angry at me in this way. Why the hell did I marry such a troublesome woman?" Shikaku got lost in thought of his troublesome wife. He was roused out of his thoughts by his wife's shouting for Shikamaru to come eat breakfast. 'Oh yeah. She's also really terrifying, and she would probably have threatened to kill me if I didn't marry her. Troublesome wife.' The thought of how they ended up together amused him.

Two sets of feet padding into the kitchen drew his attention. "Morning boys. Hope you're hungry." As if on queue Naruto's stomach let out a loud growl demanding to be fed. This resulted in him trying to hide inside the jacket Shikamaru had leant him as everybody laughed. "I'll take that as a yes to food Naruto?"

The blonde smiled sheepishly as he sat down. "Yeah, thanks Shikaku-san. Sorry I kinda...broke into your house last night, or this morning, whatever the case is, sorry." Naruto looked down at the plate in front of him in a combination of embarrassment and remorse at his actions.

"Don't worry about it kid, just try not to give Yoshino a heart attack next time. She nearly charged into that room ready to lob the head off the first person she saw." It was a mix of over exaggeration and honesty which had Naruto scratching the back of his head trying not to let his embarrassment show on his face again. "It's troublesome, but Yoshino expects you to talk to one of us."

Naruto nodded. "I will...just not right now." He took to piling food on his plate, though he loved ramen he made sure to add variety to his diet. 'Wouldn't be for another three years before anybody bothered to correct my diet.' Seeing that Shikamaru wasn't taking advantage of the food before him he decided he would help him. So after he was done with his plate he started piling it on Shikamaru's! "Eat. You're too skinny. How do you expect to use your family's jutsu if you're hungry? You said they take a lot of chakra so eat." He ignored Shikamaru's mumbling about 'troublesome blondes' but dutifully began eating his food.

Shikamaru's parents were amused at their son's obedience to the slightly younger blonde. Amused and grateful. They'd been trying to get Shikamaru to eat more for years with no avail and Shikaku was starting to fear his son wouldn't change until his team almost died. 'I'm glad you're not going to take after me Shikamaru. I didn't start to really train and take things seriously until Chōza and Inoichi got hurt and I couldn't do anything.'

The meal passed in relative silence as Shikamaru and Naruto tackled the veritable feast Shikaku had laid out. Well Naruto did most of the tackling but Shikamaru had at least eaten his first plate and voluntarily made a second, significantly smaller, plate. Naruto considered piling more on for him but figured he's meddled enough for now. "I hope you're ready to deal with the fallout of that Sakura debacle today Naruto. It's no doubt going to be troublesome."

Naruto let out a long-tired sigh at the thought of being dragged before the council. "And what prey tell happened that has you so worried son?" Shikamaru told the tale of how Naruto got tired of dealing with Sakura's crap which ultimately resulted in some aggressive physical contact and explained how there was no doubt that Sakura would complain to her mother who in turn would call a troublesome council meeting to deal with him. Shikaku could only nod thoughtfully and sympathize with the blonde. 'The council has grown more troublesome over the past decade.' "I hope you realize how stupid that was Naruto." He continued before Naruto could interrupt with the look of an impending argument on his face. "Not because you shouldn't defend yourself. I'll never tell anyone not to stop themselves from getting injured. But now I'm going to have to deal with that woman. The last thing I need is another troublesome council meeting."

There was no question of who 'that woman' was. Naruto on many occasions in the future had the misfortune of meeting Haruno Mebuki. The woman seemed to take extra delight in making his life difficult. Eventually Naruto had found out that it was her who convinced the shop owners to overcharge him rather than throw him out, and why his apartment never had hot water. 'Well now's as good a time as any to start getting people to realize they have too much power.' "Ne Shikaku-san. I thought only the Hokage or one of the elders could call for a council meeting?"

"In the past you'd be right. Unfortunately, the Hokage decided to give the council some extra leeway in the wake of the Kyūbi incident, and since he shows no sign of going back to the way things were the council now struts about like they own the place. I honestly wish Hokage-sama would put them back in their place." It wasn't exactly treason to disparage the Hokage, especially in the privacy of one's home, but Shikaku couldn't bring himself to discuss how lax the Hokage had become in many things. "In order to help the village recover more quickly, he delegated additionally matters to the civilian side of the council so he could focus on the shinobi matters. Even so somehow the Hokage still gets buried in a mountain of paperwork."

"I see." It was hard to sound interested or surprised at the revelation. The Hokage had allowed much of his power to be usurped by the council at least in practice. Officially he was still in charge and most matters still needed his approval. In practice though it's become well known that the Hokage was buried in paperwork and often went into a 'rubber stamp mode' where he'd stamp whatever came across his desk without reading it. The nightmare this created when Tsunade-baa took over was nothing short of disastrous. 'It still hadn't all been cleaned up by the time I became Hokage, at least then we were at war so it was far easier to strip them of their power. Well I'll help you out this time jiji I guess.' There was one thing that united all Kage together and it wasn't the potential for a rampaging ten-tailed beast and two crazy Uchiha's or a power mad rabbit goddess. It was plain old boring paper. Why was it so dastardly? Simple people wrote things on this paper that made all the Kage age at least 30 years by the time they retired. "Couldn't he just use some clones to get the paperwork done faster? I've seen some shinobi around the village make copies of themselves, surely if there were more of him he could finish faster?"

The seed had been laid, whether or not it made it to the Hokage was no longer his prerogative. "Most clones do duplicate the user but unfortunately the Hokage can't just sign and stamp any documents using a clone. He'd have no memory of..." Shikaku stopped in his explanation like somebody had somehow placed an elephant in front of him and he had missed it until he ran into it. "Shadow clones. Of course. Can't believe the 'Professor' and 'God of Shinobi' didn't figure that one out. Wonder how much I can get out of him for that." Naruto could tell Shikaku was actually planning on making the Hokage pay for the information to defeat paperwork. Naruto smirked. Naras didn't like politics, too troublesome, but they were good at it. No doubt this would result in some much-needed changes in the future. "Naruto, you're a genius."

Shikamaru had already finished his meal and was waiting for Naruto before they could make their way to the Academy for the day. He sat watching Naruto eat and despite having been around him for nearly 12 years it still amazed him how much he could pack away.

"Shikaku-san I'd rather not be called a genius." He knew he didn't mean in the literal sense but being branded a genius to any degree is dangerous. Especially in Konoha. "Genius from this village don't exactly have the best track record and I'd rather not be condemned to that fate. Plus, the Academy does enough of throwing that around for the rest of the world. I swear every class has a so called 'genius.' Anyway, we should probably get going Shika, we don't want to be late for Iruka-sensei." He stood up and bowed deeply to Shikaku and Yoshino. "Thank you again for breakfast, and for allowing me to stay the night, and I'm sorry for the unexpected intrusion into your home." Shikamaru and Naruto made their way toward the door, plopped down to briefly throw in their sandals before embarking on another exciting day at the Academy.

Shikaku looked thoughtful as his wife dismissed his apology as unnecessary, he hadn't actually meant Naruto was a genius, 'Though he probably is if that seal I glimpsed yesterday is any indication.' Naruto had a point though the more Shikamaru thought about all the proclaimed geniuses that had come from the Leaf. Hatake Kakashi was the only genius still loyal to the village, and he was a lazy pervert who was late to everything by at least three hours. 'Assuming nobody else was late, it was a secretive policy of Kakashi's that he'd be at least two hours later than the last person to arrive. Who the hell he knows is beyond me, perhaps his ninken observe and report, whatever the case he's hardly the shining example of a proper shinobi despite how skilled and reliable he is when it matters.'

"The boy makes a good point dear. Most genius from this village aren't shining examples of what a shinobi should be." Yoshino had taken to drinking her tea while getting ready to be a nosey mother with the other gossips. 'I mean mothers.' She really hated that she had to gossip, but sometimes it's a necessary means of gathering information. "In fact, I'd say the only stable geniuses are Naras, and we tend to lack the driving need for strength so many others seemed to crave. I guess the Yondaime could be another exception, but then he also died exceptionally young."

As her words mirrored his thoughts he didn't say anything in response to the subject. "I should probably get going as well. This pointless council meeting the Haruno woman is going to call is no doubt going to be a huge waste of time. I wonder if the summons has already gone out. Either way I'll need to stop by Chōza's and Inoichi's so we can crash this meeting appropriately." Ruining them any plots from the civilian side of the council was one of the few amusing activities Shikaku could engage in. "Of course, I'll be sure Hokage-sama is there as well." With a quick kiss goodbye to his wife Shikaku made his way out to start the day. 'I'll have to see if I can take advantage of this shadow clone paperwork method. I miss cloud watching.'

"Tsk. Leaving me to do the dishes Shikaku, and after you made such a mess of things." Revenge will be so sweet and for the rest of the day Shikaku would feel an eerie chill run down his spine every so often as his wife mused over how she could torture her husband.

"I didn't think you were going to help the Hokage with his paperwork problem so soon Naruto. I always figured you had a plan to kick the Hokage back into gear." They were walking slowly, or Shikamaru was and Naruto was merely matching his lazy pace, toward the Academy.

"Well you know what they say Shika, 'No plan ever survives first contact,' and I just couldn't help myself. Besides you don't know the pain of being a Kage and having to deal with that infernal paperwork!" The thought of all the paperwork that he was buried in during his brief tenure as Rokudaime Hokage made him shiver. 'Wars do nothing but cause pain, suffering, and paperwork. So much paperwork!'

"I don't see why you're complaining I'm the one who had to sort it all or did you forget you made me your damnable assistant?" In truth Shikamaru hated paperwork, but not for the same reasons, it was more apt to say that Shikamaru hated work, and Naruto had gone and made him his Shizune. Seeing Choji in the distance Shikamaru moved to catch up and greet his rotund friend. "Hey Choji."

It was the laziest greeting Naruto had heard. No pleasantries, no inquires, just a greeting. Yet it made the munching Akimichi smile and wave. "Hey Shikamaru! Naruto. Want some chips?" Choji on the other hand he put so much feeling in his greetings, at least toward Shikamaru, but he had offered to share his chips, so Naruto figured he was moving toward acceptable acquaintance right now. Which was fine with him.

"No thanks Choji I had my fill this morning, though Shikamaru could probably use to eat more." The small poke toward Shikamaru's lackluster eating habits had the desired effect for Naruto. Choji laughed and agreed before shoveling another handful of chips into his mouth, and Shikamaru sighed and muttered about his troublesome friends under his breath.

"Surprised to see you both together this morning. No offense Naruto but you're usually already bouncing off the walls and Shikamaru is usually trying to will the walls to move out of his way so he doesn't have to walk around them." It was a valid point and it just proves they'll have to do more to make their association less suspicious. Barely been two days and already people are noticing changes.

Naruto looked uncomfortable at the thought of talking about his behavior yesterday. Crying was never something he did and he hated letting other people see him cry. "Naruto crashed at my place yesterday. It was too troublesome to send him home after training and dinner." Naruto smiled at Shikamaru grateful for the half-truth. Naruto also preferred not to lie to his friends, even in one-sided friendships like it was right now.

"Makes sense." They spent the rest of the time walking to the Academy making small talk about things. It was mostly Naruto and Choji talking, getting to know each other so to speak. Exchanging favorite foods, an argument between what was better yakiniku or ramen, agreeing to an eating contest at their respective favorites to prove which was superior. All in all it was an enjoyable morning for Naruto.

As they made their way through the village Choji couldn't help but notice that more eyes were on him today than usual. Most people tend to look down on the Akimichi for being considered 'fat' not understanding if they tried their clan techniques with someone like Shikamaru's build they'd destroy themselves. The more they walked the more he realized the looks were different. They weren't the usual looks of disgust or shame that usually accompanied any Akimichi but looks of hatred and scorn. It wasn't long before he realized they were being directed toward Naruto who was either unaware or used to ignoring them. It made him ask why they would look at Naruto that way. 'Sure he could be loud at times, but he was pretty funny at times, and really nice. He's never called me fat even though everybody else in class does.' Eventually they reached the Academy and disappeared from the outside world as they made their way to Iruka-sensei's room and sat down waiting for the rest of the class to arrive.

Shikaku stood in the Hokage tower waiting for the secretary to let him in for his usual morning meeting to discuss the current status of the shinobi forces. It was usually the same; we're getting more and more missions, we need more shinobi to meet the increased demand, some of our shinobi were growing lazy and complacent, and so on. For Shikaku it was a complete waste of time. 'These meetings should really only be called when there's a significant change or surprise.' Nevertheless he was waiting on the Hokage.

He recalled his earlier time spent with Chōza and Inoichi. He wasn't surprised to hear that a council meeting had been called to discuss Naruto's assault of her daughter, but he was surprised to learn they had been informed late last night. 'Interesting. It seems word of my son's association with Naruto has already spread and the Haruno woman is plotting. No matter the Hokage and I, and probably Shibi, will be attending even if we weren't invited.' Chōza and Inoichi had been kind enough to inform him the meeting had been called for lunch. No doubt another ploy by the Haruno to try and humiliate Naruto to face these so called 'charges' and allow her daughter to gloat at his misfortune.

After his brief meeting with his teammates he made his way over to the Aburame compound. Shibi had returned earlier in the evening from his mission and was surprised to see Shikaku arrive so early. He wasn't bothered by his lack of notice about the council meeting, the Aburame never usually brought up any concerns so they're presence was largely symbolic and only necessitated when votes would be needed. Until he heard of the reason for the meeting. Shibi had listened to his son talk about his encounter with his new friends and was pleased he had found those his own age who appreciated his silent presence and were understanding of his insects. It was a rarity for an Aburame to meet acceptance so easily, and he would not let anybody threaten his son's newfound companionship. For an Aburame their friends became an extension of their hive. Any threat to the hive must be neutralized. Naruto and Shikamaru were apart of Shino's hive and by extension his and he wasn't going to let anybody play their games with them.

Finally, the secretary ushered him into the Hokage's office. "Hokage-sama." The greeting was accompanied by the appropriately respectful bow. It was entirely as mundane as Shikaku thought it would be but he carried on his duty as was expected of the jōnin commander. After the last status report, more of the same "our ninja are growing lazy and not training as hard as they could/should be" the meeting came to an end.

As he was gathering up his materials to clear the way for the Hokage's next appoint Shikaku broached the subject of the impending council meeting. "I hope you're available for a council meeting around lunch Hokage-sama." He could tell news of a council meeting was a surprise to him, so he continued. "It would appear Councilwoman Haruno called it late last night to discuss some assault charges against her daughter by an academy student. Conspicuously it would seem neither you, Shibi, or I were invited to said meeting." Shikaku knew he had the Hokage's interest piqued. It was one thing not to invite the shinobi council to a meeting as not all matters needed the attention of shinobi, but it was another thing to call a meeting and try to exclude certain members of the shinobi council and another thing entirely not to inform the Hokage.

"Who are these charges levied against?" The question wasn't necessary. It didn't take a genius to connect the dots here. Shikaku and Shibi had not been told of the meeting. He was not informed either. Interestingly enough yesterday Lizard informed him that Naruto had left the Academy and accompanied Shikamaru and Shino to the Nara lands. He reprimanded his ANBU for not leaving a suitable watch despite the perceived safety the Nara would have provided by proxy but left the boy alone for the time being. No doubt this meeting would be about Naruto.

Confirming his thoughts, he heard Shikaku say, "Uzumaki Naruto." He had heard of an incident from Cat that the boy had been involved in small altercation that the Haruno girl instigated. 'It would seem young Sakura has taken after her mother in trying to manipulate facts and circumstances to suit her needs.' Folding his hands and resting his chin on them he looked at Shikaku. "I shall make my presence known after the meeting begins. It wouldn't do to interrupt such an important meeting before it begins after all." He couldn't resist smiling. He may portray a kind grandfather but he was still the Hokage and he didn't like people trying to go behind his back.

Satisfied that he had done his bit to get the Hokage to at least start reigning the council in he turned to leave. "Oh before I forget Hokage-sama. Naruto had the most interesting idea about how to complete your paperwork faster." He saw the Hokage lean forward in anticipation of such information. 'No wonder Yoshino does this, its so much fun!' He smiled. "It seems the boy has seen some shinobi using clones around the village for various reasons. I immediately shot his idea down though as the clones would still have to tell you what they were reading and signing and wouldn't really lighten your work load." He watched satisfied as the Hokage's shoulders slumped in defeat, he had been so hopeful. "Unless of course you know of a clone technique that allows the user to absorb whatever the clone has experienced." He left as the Hokage's eyes widened before he began to repeatedly slam his head on his desk muttering 'stupid, stupid, stupid' with each strike. 'It's going to be a good day. Not too troublesome but just troublesome enough.' He shivered as if he felt he was forgetting something important.

The academy had been going well today. Aside from the smirks and looks of superiority from Sakura every now and then, Naruto had mostly been left alone. Shino had joined them after they arrived and took the seat Ino usually sat in as Shikamaru, Choji, and Naruto took up the back row. This had the unfortunate reaction of making Ino and Sakura realizing there were two seats next to Sasuke as they each took one. 'Poor Sasuke.' Naruto may still be confused about what to make of Sasuke but even he didn't wish his fangirls upon him, that's just cruel and unusual punishment.

Naruto had spent most of the morning thinking of what to do about Sasuke. The simplest and easiest solution was obviously to kill him, but this created numerous problems. For the moment Sasuke was still having his pedestal built beneath him. 'It even comes complete with a convenient stick to shove up his ass.' Killing him would upset the village greatly. Naruto had remembered Itachi's words about Sasuke from his first encounter with the man after he had returned from his trip with Jiraiya. 'Sasuke is still a blank canvas. He can easily be dyed any color.' It was true. Manipulating Sasuke was easier than taking candy from a baby. Just mention Itachi or offer him unimaginable power and he was putty in your hand. Its how Orochimaru got his hands on him, how Obito manipulated him in such a way as to partially reveal the truth behind the Uchiha massacre, and why Sasuke finally decided to destroy the village.

Part of why Sasuke became so dark and twisted was that the village let him. Honestly letting a child live in the place where his family was slaughtered alone is the stupidest decision in the history of anything. Naruto was trying to come up with ways to prevent Sasuke from going down the same path. He didn't have any desire to save him from himself, but he couldn't let Sasuke grow up and destroy the village again and there was no way to be sure they could stop him from following the same path without trying to save him. 'Why is everybody with the name Uchiha so damn difficult?' Deciding he couldn't make this decision alone he decided to wait until he could talk with Shikamaru and Shino.

Having been lost in thought for most of the morning time passed quickly and lunch arrived sooner than he expected. As if on queue one of the ANBU appeared in the room and told Iruka that Naruto had been summoned to appear before the council. Naruto got up to follow the ANBU and met Sakura's victorious smug look with one of his own. Had he actually cared to notice he would have seen her shift from a smug look of assured victory to one of utter confusion. 'Why would he be smiling like that? I know why he's been summoned. After all my mother's the one who called it and she knew it meant trouble for Naruto.' Still she was confused and unnerved by his smile.

A quick **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** later and they were outside the council room. The ANBU knocked, announcing their presence, and opened the door ushering him inside. "I have brought Uzumaki." As quickly as the ANBU had appeared to retrieve him they had disappeared back into the shadows to resume their post.

Haruno Mebuki had looked confident when she first walked into the council room. So far her plan had gone well. The Nara and Aburame clan

heads were absent as was the Hokage. 'Can't believe two of our oldest clans would voluntarily allow themselves to associate with the demon child. No matter after today we may well be rid of it.' The thought of finally getting rid of the 'demon child' made her giddy with anticipation. As it neared the time for the Academy's lunch period she ordered the ANBU who had been assigned to guarding the council today to fetch the Uzumaki child being careful to modify her speech. It was well known what happened to those who broke the Sandaime's law regarding the Kyūbi. 'I still can't fathom why he made a law to try and protect that demon. He should've killed it when it was a baby like the Yondaime would have wanted us to!'

She sat happily waiting for the demon to show himself believe she would finally be able to at least remove him from the academy. 'If the boy couldn't refrain from attacking my poor daughter, what hope do the rest of the children have?' The Hokage would have no choice now that the demon has finally started showing his true colors. She was too happily engrossed in her own impending victory over the Kyūbi to notice Shikaku and Shibi enter the room with the other clan heads. Also absent was the elder council. Either by choice or intention Shikaku couldn't say. 'Wouldn't be surprised if it was both. Those three may disagree with Hokage-sama about Naruto attending the academy but they at least agree that he should be a shinobi.'

A few minutes of waiting and the giddy Haruno was roused from her imaginary victory celebration at the sound of a loud knock. As she turned her head toward the door she took note that the Nara and Aburame clan heads were here to her annoyance. 'They shouldn't be here for associating with that...thing. No matter. The Hokage isn't here and that's all that matters in the end. After its done he won't be able to do anything for the demon.'

"I have brought Uzumaki." Shikaku took note of the ANBU and would be sure to ask who gave him his orders to bring Naruto here. The only left to do was wait for the Hokage and arrive to enjoy the show. Sadly, this meant Naruto was going to have to suffer through this farce for a little bit.

Ignoring the presence of the two she hadn't summoned to this meeting Haruno Mebuki stood up clearing her throat. "Uzumaki Naruto you have been brought before this council to answer for assaulting one of your classmates, Haruno Sakura, outside of sanctioned training spars." Everyone knew she was stretching for an assault charge, most didn't care, so long as they ruined the 'demon's' chances of making it through the Academy. So long as Naruto was a civilian they could exercise some control over him, but if he became a shinobi they'd lose whatever power they had over him and could no longer act overtly against him lest he be accused of sabotaging the village's military strength. "Have you anything to say in your defense?"

Before Naruto got a chance to open his mouth the door was thrown open as the Hokage entered, pipe in his mouth and one hand behind his back. "Apologies it seems I was held up, of course as I was not notified of this meeting I'm sure you will make an exception. No doubt the person who called it merely forgot to inform me." The reprimand was clear and Mebuki felt her confidence diminish as the Hokage walked around to take his seat above the rest. "Please continue."

"Of course Hokage-sama." Deciding to stick to formality to provide anymore potential openings for the council to exploit. "In response to your accusation Haruno-san, I categorical deny the allegation. I did not 'assault' your daughter as you claim. She attempted to strike me. The first time I avoided it and politely asked her not to hit me. The second time I decided to ask her again only I was less polite."

Hoping to salvage what she could Mebuki decided to attack his credibility. "Why exactly should we believe a word you say? Your reputation around the village is well known and it hardly casts you in a favorable or trustworthy light." She didn't bother to question why Naruto would have attacked her daughter taking Sakura's word that she had done nothing to antagonize him. "What did you do to make my daughter, who wouldn't harm a fly, try and hit you?" The anger and venom in her voice was quite clear and directed at him for some how turning her wonderfully well-behaved daughter into a brute. It was thoroughly un-lady like. 'Clearly the demon's presence around the other children is making them more aggressive!'

Deciding to play his own game Naruto let out a barely noticeable smirk. It went unnoticed by most, except Shikaku, Shibi, Hyūga Hiashi, and the Hokage. "She and I were arguing over the results of a recent spar between me and Uchiha-san. Sakura-san disagreed with the results and demanded I apologize to Uchiha-san."

Many in the room, including those on the shinobi side, were confused as to why Naruto would have to apologize for a spar that he clearly would have lost. Sasuke was the rising star at the academy and it was well known that Naruto regularly scored at the bottom in comparison to his classmates. "What exactly would you have to apologize for?"

Naruto turned toward Hiashi who had posed the question. "It would appear Hyūga-sama," it would help his position to not place himself on the same level as Hiashi and he knew the man loved to be addressed with respect, "that I damaged his pride and may have injured him. I'm not entirely sure if he was injured after he lost as he seemed fine." As the news that Sasuke had been defeated in a taijutsu spar and that it was Naruto who hadn't beaten him there was an immediate cry of shouting from the civilian councilmembers. Some had demanded to know what he had done to injure 'Uchiha-sama' while others were making shouts that the demon should die for potentially injuring the last Uchiha.

"Silence!" The Hokage was equally surprised that Sasuke had lost and that it was Naruto who did it. From everything he heard and observed about the blonde, he wasn't particularly skilled, and his performance was less than stellar.

Haruno Mebuki however couldn't believe that the demon had managed to defeat the Uchiha or that her daughter would instigate a confrontation. "You expect us to believe that *you* managed to defeat Uchiha-sama and that my daughter provoked you into action?"

"No, I don't expect you to believe me, but if you bothered to look into the allegations your daughter was making I'm sure you could find out for yourself." Naruto waited for whatever would happen next.

"I will vouch for Uzumaki. My son spoke of the spar last night at dinner and the 'fight' Naruto had with Sakura after they returned to class. Everything he said matches with what Naruto just told us." Shikaku leveled a gaze at the Haruno woman. "I don't appreciate having my time wasted. I'm a busy man and having to take time out of my day to come sit in this farce of a council meeting is bothersome. Especially if you can't be bothered to investigate the accusation you're levying against somebody else." There was a murmur of agreement from the clan heads. "And your daughter shouldn't start fights if she's not prepared to handle the consequences. Perhaps we should be discussing charges against your daughter as opposed to Naruto here." Shikaku had no intention of wasting anymore time especially with this so called 'fight' that took place. Even if they were fighting, it's a shinobi academy, fights are meant to happen.

Mebuki became indignant at the thought of charges being brought against her daughter. "My daughter wouldn't do anything to antagonize anybody! She's a well behaved young woman! That...boy has obviously been corrupting her and the other children with his presence. How long do you intend to let him endanger our children!?" Her emotionally fueled rant inspired the other civilian councilmembers to rally their agreement with her.

Shikaku smirked, 'Guess its time I start playing the angry father card, sometimes politics is too easy.' "Are you calling my son a liar? Are you

questioning his integrity, and by extension my own?!" His voice was growing louder and louder with each 'insult' Haruno Mebuki had unintentionally made about his son. In truth she hadn't questioned anything relating to the Nara clan but the implication was that Naruto was lying, and by extension that meant his son must be as well.

This seemed to have the effect of cowering the other councilmembers but Haruno remained defiant. She started gesturing wildly going on and on about how Naruto was a bad influence just with his mere presence. Eventually she got so lost in her own rant that she came dangerously close to calling Naruto the 'demon child.' Never being one not to pounce on an opportunity once presented Shikaku sent his shadow to stop the woman's frantic movement. "I do hope you weren't about to bring up things you aren't supposed to." His shadow slowly began to snake its way up the woman's body toward her neck. "It's been awhile since I've stretched my legs so to speak, and I'd hate for there to be an *accident* right now." She wisely understood the threat and shut up.

"Enough of this. Shikaku, release her. As for Naruto-kun here there will be no charges brought against him. Or your daughter. This farce is over. Naruto-kun you can return to class now." Naruto bowed deeply before he quietly left the room. "As for the rest of you, I hope you remember that the Hokage's presence at *any* council meeting is not a courtesy. It is a requirement! I have allowed you all a small amount of latitude to handle certain matters, but it's clear to me you've been given too much free reign." The aged Hokage stood up and silently made his way out of the room to return to his office. "The next time anyone of you thinks to call a meeting I expect to be informed, and if it's a waste a time then perhaps we will be in need of new counselors. Good day."

After the Hokage had left the clan heads and a majority of the civilian council left. However, Haruno Mebuki slumped in her chair. Things had definitely not gone her way and she had wondered why things seemed to spin out of her control so quickly. She knew it was either the Akimichi or the Yamanaka that told the Nara of the meeting. The closeness of those clans was well known, and she had figured that into her considerations. The Aburame was an unexpected addition, but aside from her, the Nara, and the Hokage nobody had contributed anything of worth to the meeting. As for who informed the Hokage she wasn't sure. 'That *boy* just keeps walking around as if nothing can touch him and as if he belongs here.' She took comfort that October 10th was approaching fast. She had heard rumblings of another 'fox hunt' this year and was looking forward to its success.

Naruto returned to class as the lunch period was ending. As he walked back into the room he happily waved toward Sakura with a huge smirk on his face as he moved to sit in his usual seat behind Sasuke. 'That went well.' Sakura however was looking worried at his apparent happy demeanor after what should have been a strong chastisement before the council. Before she could think on it too much Iruka-sensei and Mizuki-sensei walked into the room and announced that it was time for shuriken and kunai practice.

Naruto hopped happily along next to Shikamaru and Shino as they made their way outside. "Good lunch Naruto?" Naruto excitedly began to tell Shikamaru and Shino about the council meeting and complemented Shikamaru's father on his acting ability. "Well nobody could ever say a Nara was lazy when it comes to their family. I'm surprised he threatened to strangle her in front of the Hokage though." Shino could only agree it was an unexpected move on Shikaku's part.

Iruka and Mizuki began working with the students who struggled the most with their weapons leaving the rest of the class to wait around for their turn. "I'm not sure what should be done about Sasuke." They both stood on either side of him as they watched some of the civilian kids try, and fail, to hit the target. "He's still a bastard, but I'm not sure we should just outright kill him without *trying* to stop him from turning out the way he did. He was a valuable asset during the war."

There was a logical aspect to keeping Sasuke alive, without him the war may have ended quite differently. 'Although the net result would have been the same, had the war gone poorly the village would have been destroyed by Madara or Kaguya anyway.' "I agree with Naruto-san. We should at least make the attempt to stop Sasuke from walking the same path. Why you ask? If he remained loyal to the village this time he would be an even greater asset and we wouldn't have to worry about him betraying us after the war."

"Fine, we'll try to save the jerk. It'll be troublesome but it's better than trying to manipulate him. We've seen how that usually works out." Everybody had been manipulating Sasuke the moment the Uchiha were brought to the brink of extinction. The council and most of the civilians wanted to use his family's wealth and influence for their own gains, Itachi wanted Sasuke to kill him, and the Hokage wanted Sasuke to go on believing his clan was blameless in its own downfall. "If he decides to defect again though, I'm not going to wait for him to become a threat, if he betrays the village I will kill him while the circumstances are more favorable for us." It was an acceptable compromise, but they had to put their discussion on hold as Mizuki called for Naruto to take his turn.

Iruka was still working with the civilian kids but they had decided to not waste more time they'd just have the clan kids practice with Mizuki while he helps them. Naruto walked up and picked up the kunai first. He started throwing with his right hand, his first set hit the bullseye. "Wrong hand Naruto." Mizuki called at seeing him perform so well. Sighing Naruto collected the kunai and threw them with his left hand. They all still hit the target, but his performance wasn't as good. None managed to hit the bullseye and only one managed to be marginally on target. Mizuki called for the next student not giving Naruto another opportunity.

"Was it this obvious last time around Naruto?" Shikamaru had watched the whole thing and looked shocked that Mizuki could be so blatantly obvious and yet nobody called him out on it.

"More or less. Most people only see what they want to see Shikamaru. It's why nobody has figured out who my father is. They all expect to see a talentless dead last so that's what they choose to see. Any success I have is a fluke, luck, or me cheating somehow." It was Shino's turn and he performed as expected and he walked back to stand with them. "For the next few weeks I'm going to focus on finish my seal to make a stronger clone. I'll have to pull a few pranks worthy of my title as 'prank king' so as to make everybody think I'm back to normal." He smirked at the both of them. "Which means you two get to help me with them! After all what fun is pranking if you can't share the experience with your friends?" Shikamaru and Shino both began trying to get out of participating not as sure as Naruto in their ability to not get caught. "Oh well, if you two don't want to join in I guess I can make you potential victims...I mean targets!" Naruto knew he had them now. Nobody ever escaped his pranks.

For six weeks the Hokage was swamped with complaints from people who seemed to run into bad luck. One shop owner was walking through the market when he was suddenly doused in mud and feathers. Another had closed his shop up for the night and when he returned he found his shop missing and replaced with a boarded-up wall. When the wall was removed they found another, and on and on it went. No matter how many walls were taken down there was always another behind it. It was baffling. A Hyūga had been called in and found nothing unusual about the wood and detected no traces of chakra within it and still the walls kept reappearing. A few days later the shop seemingly reappeared where it was supposed to be only everything was inverted. The shelves with their products were no on the ceiling defying gravity. The shop keeper eventually just cut his

losses and decided to move to another location. As if waiting for that to happen things promptly went back to normal. The new shop owner was quite lucky in his find. He had bought the location from the previous one for dirt cheap as he just wanted to get as far away from the absurd shop as possible, and now he had a shop full of left over merchandise to sell. A good investment.

Somebody had also managed to sneak into ANBU Headquarters and replaced all the black uniforms with bright pink or orange ones. The rest of the village took delight when they caught sight of members of the black ops division, and even more so when the Hokage ordered that they couldn't replace their uniforms with the standard black. Only Cat had been spared the humiliation. The Hokage reasoned if they couldn't guard their own laundry what use were they to the village. Suffice it to say if the ANBU had to get involved in any situation within the village it usually wasn't nice, they were annoyed that they had been made fools of and tended to take out their frustration whenever they legally could. After two weeks the standard uniforms were back in their place with a taunting note that they should really check their windows more often. It was odd because ANBU HQ was underground, and therefore had no windows. There were a couple ventilation shafts that were ordinarily considered too small and narrow for anybody to sneak through. They promptly layered trap upon trap that promised immense pain for anybody who tried to sneak in that way.

The Hokage was annoyed and amused at the same time. Annoyed that the village seemed to have run afoul of a certain blonde-haired prankster, though nobody could ever prove anything, and annoyed at the amount of paperwork Naruto-kun was making for him. He had started using shadow clones to help with his paperwork but inexplicably documents he remembered reading and approving appeared back on his desk as if they had not been signed. He grew increasingly frustrated as he watched his signature on one of the documents he had just signed disappear. "NARUTO!" His voice echoed loud throughout the tower and he heard the loud sound of laughter as he sent his ANBU to bring the blonde child to him.

Naruto led the ANBU on a long chase through the village that resulted in minor damages as they fell into his traps before they finally caught up to him, meaning Naruto let them catch him, and hauled him into the office wrapped in miles of ninja wire to be sure he couldn't escape. He had also been searched and had anything potentially prank worthy removed from his person. He sat tied up before the Hokage's desk with a look of mock indignation on his face. "I'm pleased to see you have returned to your usually boisterous self, Naruto-kun, but must you prank me using this blasted paperwork!" Naruto 'hrmpled' and mumbled how it wasn't his fault his guards weren't good enough to stop him. Sarutobi let out a loud laugh as he felt his ANBU bristle at the accurate assessment of his self-appointed grandson. "How goes the Academy, Naruto-kun?"

"It's fine jiji. Iruka-sensei's lessons are really boring though. Why can't he make them more fun?" Naruto knew for his plan to work he'd have to appear as normal as possible for a bit longer. 'One week from today and everything will change.' He was both dreading and looking forward to his impending birthday.

"The lessons may be boring Naruto-kun, but they are important, and you should listen to your instructors. Everything they teach you is meant to help you survive." He looked up from a mission report he had been reading to stare at the blonde with as stern a gaze as he could. "Now tell me how you're messing with my paperwork and I'll let you go run up at a tab at Ichiraku's."

Naruto pretended to be swayed by the offer of all you can eat ramen, though he would eat all he could, the Ichirakus had always treated him well and his business helped them survive as well. "Ramen?! You got it jiji! I switched all the pens on your desk with ones that had disappearing ink in them!" He scratched the back of his head and laughed nervously. "It's a pretty great prank ne?"

The Hokage began grumbling. "The pens! Of course, it's the pens! I checked everything else and still it kept disappearing. I'm too old for this job." He untied Naruto. "Now go get your ramen, and don't prank me through my paperwork anymore Naruto-kun, please have mercy on an old man."

Naruto tackle-hugged the old man as he held out his arms. "You got it jiji! RAMEN!" He bolted out the nearest window much to the Hokage's annoyance and barely heard his shout about people using doors.

While Naruto had been busy in his mini-pranking streak, Shikaku had been running a quiet investigation into the blonde. So far nothing he had found was reassuring him that the boy was treated even remotely like a human being. Reports from the ANBU who had been assigned to watch him repeatedly showed that many villagers and even some shinobi have taken to attacking the blonde. The attacks were spaced out quite a bit, but it had prompted a look into Naruto's medical records. Things seemed to only get worse from there. Somehow the civilian council had gotten it in their heads that they had the ability to issue commands to shinobi. What's worse is the shinobi obeyed their commands! 'The only time the civilian council can issue any commands is if everybody else in the chain of command is dead!'

Naruto has been in the hospital more times than most people are in a lifetime. Sometimes with minor injuries and sometimes with injuries that would have killed most other people. It seems Kyūbi was working hard to keep the boy from succumbing to his wounds. The more he read into his files the angrier he became. The ANBU who were supposed to prevent him from being injured were either incompetent, in which case he would be having them removed from the ANBU very soon; or allowing the boy to be beaten and nearly killed, in which case he would probably be killing them very soon. As far as Shikaku could tell the only ANBU who had actually protected the boy before he was injured were Cat, Dog, and Crow. Dog was no longer ANBU and had been ordered to stay away from the boy, and Crow was a nukenin. It didn't spell for good news when he finally approached the Hokage.

The shopkeepers, if they didn't throw him out, made him pay exorbitant prices and sold him subpar equipment, and food that had already spoilt or rotten or would do so soon. It's no wonder the kid seems to live off ramen. The Ichiraku's had been the only bright spot in the boy's troubled life. They never overcharged him and practically gave him ramen for free whenever he was hungry. Shikaku made sure that money started appearing after the blonde left and he couldn't afford to pay for the meal they had given him though he made sure that they would never know who it was from or why it was left for them. As far as he could tell they didn't look a gift horse in the mouth and used the money to off-set their Naruto related expenses.

His apartment was perhaps the worst part of the whole endeavor. It was in a dilapidated building that looked ready to fall over at the first sign of trouble. As far as he could tell Naruto was the only permanent tenant, although there were several short-term stays from couples but never more than a few hours or a day at most. Either he lived in a well-known whore-house or people left as quickly as they arrived. 'I'm not entirely sure which one it is. I certainly wouldn't live here, but neither is this the red-light district.'

Inside was even worse. The wallpaper was peeling, the floorboards were rotten out in some places, there was no hot water, and the electricity seemed to go out every 3 hours like clockwork. Graffiti regularly wound up on the inside and outside of the boy's apartment. Shikaku never caught whoever it was who cleaned it up but he was desperate to find and thank them for trying to help the boy. At first Shikaku wondered why the apartment seemed so lifeless but after the first couple of break-ins it became apparent that his personal property wouldn't be safe. After a little more digging he did find a collection of scrolls and other personal affects buried under some of the newer looking floor boards. 'It seems he's taken to hiding what matters to him, can't say I blame him but nobody should be made to live this way.' Thankfully, Naruto seemed to make himself

scarce at the first sign of trouble. Either by heading to the Aburame's, to Shikamaru's place, or he seemed to vanish into the surrounding woods.

His time at the academy was better, if only slightly. It seems the quality of his education wasn't entirely the fault of sabotage. The entire curriculum was lacking as far as he could tell. It would appear the wartime textbooks had never been phased out so students were still working with incomplete materials meant to crank out shinobi quickly. Not to mention the books they used were horrendously child friendly. A cartoon about weapon handling safety. A comical image of Kyūbi that nowhere near reflected how terrifying a tailed beast was. No mention of the Uzumaki clan or Uzushio at all. 'How could such an important part of our history just be excluded from the curriculum?' Then there's the three great wars. Even for events he had been present for and knew didn't play out as they had said, the way the books were written screamed "Konoha is always right" and it wasn't any wonder why our shinobi have grown arrogant and complacent if this is the garbage that's being shoveled down their throats.

Still despite the subpar curriculum the instructors, save for one Umino Iruka, seemed to be hell bent on sabotaging Naruto. Early reports indicated that Naruto was right handed and yet he's listed as a left-hand dominant shinobi. His disciplinary record at first doesn't make any sense. He had been thrown out of class on numerous occasions for answering a question and apparently 'disrupting class' in the process. After awhile he started getting thrown out for his pranks and the classroom disruption complaints all but disappeared. At the same time his written exam scores began to spiral downward. His physical exam result remained relatively stable, although he remembered a note from Cat in one of his earlier observation reports that the boy had apparently been instructed incorrectly in the basic Academy taijutsu katas the school used to help develop a decent base for the kids to build from.

None of what he found in official reports matched with the boy he had gotten to know. The Naruto he knew was intelligent, capable of devising impressive seals that even he couldn't make heads nor tails of. He had designed his own custom storage scroll that was capable of holding much more than the usual ones sold at the supply stores. At times he spoke far more intelligently and wisely than a boy his age should. He was capable of keeping up with Shikamaru in a game of shogi, and he was constantly working on his chakra control. None of this screamed a lack of effort or devotion to his studies and yet the academy instructors' reports were saying that Naruto would be lucky to pass the graduation exam at this rate.

His wife hadn't found much different from his own observations. Apparently, the other parents told their children to stay away from Naruto because he was dangerous. They didn't remember who started the rumor that the boy was such a danger as everybody always seemed to say they heard it from someone else. When asked if they had ever seen the boy do anything to justify that perceived danger they could never come up with anything. The few times they had heard of families encouraging their children to interact with Naruto they quickly found the families had moved on after being harassed by their neighbors or denied services in the village. It reeked of a conspiracy to keep the blonde at arm's length.

'This is the most troublesome thing I've looked into since the Hyūga incident years ago.' Shikaku was angry, disgusted, ashamed, and resolute all at the same time. The first two directed entirely at the village and shinobi who could treat an innocent child so poorly. The last two directed at himself. He was ashamed because for so long he had pushed the boys well being off on somebody else, namely the Hokage, and resolute because no longer would he stand idly by while Naruto suffers.

He set aside the many papers he had gathered during his investigation and made arrangements to meet with the Hokage first thing next week. 'I can only hope Sandaime-sama actually does something about all of this.'

A few days later found Shikamaru, Shino, and Naruto training. "Well guys, it's almost the big day." A slightly taller Naruto was chatting with his two closest friends while some of his clones threw senbon at them while they practiced their tree climbing, well blunted kunai for Shikamaru and Shino. "Three more days and it'll be October 10th, the day we start actively trying to change things. It'll be slow going for a while. There isn't much we can do as academy students or genin, but with any luck we can maneuver ourselves to be in a better position than before." He stopped and dropped to the ground as one of his clones had managed to hit his leg with a senbon. He called for his clones to stop so they could take a quick rest before starting up again.

Shikamaru and Shino came down off the tree to rest and take water. Their training regimen hadn't changed much except for the adoption of more physical training after a 'youthful' session with Gai-sensei. The man is one of the most eccentric shinobi ever born, and with his mini-me Lee already looking forward to being on a genin team under 'the most Youthful and Noble Green Beast of Konoha!' it was quite the training session. As none of them were going to focus solely on taijutsu Gai steered them away from weights as they could hamper the body's growth if used improperly. He suggested resistance seals but said he couldn't help us apply them as there were few fūinjutsu practitioners in the village. He said you could usually find a pair of bracelets at shinobi supply stores that had resistance seals inscribed on them, but that they were rarely used nowadays so it was doubtful we'd find any. He did however come up with an intensive plan of push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, chin-ups, and every other kind of 'ups.' He insisted they would eventually be doing thousands of them every day, but that they should start small and work their way up to eventually 100 reps a day of each. Aside from the physical training there was endurance training of running around the village walls for as long as you can and then going one lap further than you think you can each day. Suffice it to say the three would be genin were exhausted. They had decided against diving head first into Gai-sensei's proposed training regiment and adopted a more moderate pace. 20 reps a piece of each 'up' and a few laps around the village were an acceptable place to start for the three of them. They could bump it up after they became genin.

After Gai-sensei's 'youthful' training they still had their regular training to improve their chakra control. Not willing to go further than tree climbing yet lest they draw too much attention to themselves they stuck with Naruto's 'advanced' tree climbing. Shikamaru and Shino had eventually agreed to graduate past rubber balls but still didn't want to be skewered, so it was blunted kunai. Naruto however skipped that and went for senbon. In his mind it helped motivate you to dodge and deflect better if you were incentivized. 'What's a better incentive than pain?'

As if knowing he was being thought of there was a sudden cry of "YOUTH!" nearby and they immediately ducked into cover as Gai and Lee came by running on just their pinky fingers. Swearing that they'd do 500 laps around the village this way and if they didn't they'd climb the Hokage monument using just their toes. Not one of them questioned if they'd actually do it or not. Once the coast was clear they returned to the clearing they were training in and sat back down. Naruto had finally caught up with Hinata and informed her of his preferences. It had not gone well.

"Hello Hinata-san." Immediately spinning around to see the blonde who was supposed to be walking with Shikamaru and Shino she tried to retreat into her jacket's turtle neck embarrassed at being caught stalking.

"H-h-hello N-n-naruto-kun." It was a whisper and extremely difficult to hear and she started rubbing her index fingers together.

"I just came to ask why you've been following me for...well a long time now." Her face got even redder as she realized she had been found out.

"W-w-well y-y-you see..." Naruto had forgotten how bad her shyness was in their youth and he could tell just trying to talk to him was taking all her confidence and fraying her already frazzled nerves. He knew this wasn't going to go well at all. "I've admired you for a while N-n-naruto-kun."

"I see. Do you like me Hinata-san?" It was a dumb question, but he needed her to admit it to herself as much as him. She looked at him as if saying 'what are you talking about of course I like you!' Fearing she didn't understand what he was asking he asked again. "No. Hinata-san do you LIKE me?" He emphasized the 'like' and eventually it registered on her face if the deepening blush was any indication. 'Honestly I'm amazed she hasn't fainted yet. I seem to recall her doing that a lot when I was around.'

Hinata was equally amazed that she hadn't fainted and was happy to be talking to her crush of so many years. She wanted so badly to admit her feelings but was afraid of rejection. Eventually she worked up the courage to nod her head at his question, and when Naruto didn't answer she eventually squeaked out a 'Yes.'

Naruto felt like the worst person in the world for the words he was about to say but it'd be better in the long run to get it out of the way now rather than let her build up hope that they could one day be together. "Hinata." He could tell by the way she made herself even smaller she was terrified. "I'm gay, Hinata." That seemed to snap her out of her shyness as her head shot up to look at him with wide eyes desperately hoping this would turn out to be some sort of cruel joke.

"W-w-w-what?" Tears were threatening to spill out of her eyes. Of all the things she thought Naruto might say that was not anywhere in her imagination.

"I like boys Hinata." He watched as the tears began to fall freely now. He tried to move to comfort her, but she ran away faster than an Akimichi toward an all you can eat buffet. "Well that could have gone better, but it could've been worse as well I suppose. I hope she can move past it soon. Hopefully Kurenai-sensei can help her out." He knew she'd run to Kurenai over anyone in her family.

Hinata still hadn't tried to talk to Naruto and he had barely seen her around anywhere since the day he told her. He returned to discussing their plans for his birthday. "I've got the seal down and as long as they don't actually kill me the clone should be able to take quite the amount of punishment." He could see Shikamaru's face harden in anger at the thought of the villagers doing enough damage to kill Naruto. "There's nothing that can be done for now Shika, all we can do is plan for the best. That's why it'll be a clone of me. Once the clone gets taken to the hospital and bandaged, I'll sneak in and replace my clone self. Since Kyūbi isn't available to help my injuries heal, we'll actually have to mimic how the hospital treats me. Assuming they treat me that is." It was no guarantee the hospital staff would try to treat me. It was random chance as to who was on duty. Some doctors and nurses would help him while others would suddenly feign illness when he arrived, unless the Hokage was there to scare them into action.

"If you can I'd like you two to help me replace myself. No doubt after the attack my ANBU detail will be stepped up and they'll be significantly more attentive after the Hokage chews them out." They nodded their heads in understanding at the necessity of a distraction. For once the hospital's behavior should benefit them as its doubtful he'd be allowed any visitors. "I hope you're acting is as good as your father's Shika. No offense Shino but the Aburame are not well known for the emotional reactions, but if you could make your hive seem noticeably agitated Shino that would work wonders as well." Shino nodded believing he could appear to be sufficiently agitated at not being allowed to see Naruto.

"Once I'm discharged we can start going over more of our plans but for now we should just keep training for when we're assigned to our genin teams. I doubt we'll be able to alter the composition too much, even if I won't be the dead last anymore there'll be years of poor performance. Not to mention Kakashi-sensei request I be placed on a Sasuke's team so I could be his rival and tie him to the village." It was a stupid and illogical reasoning, but it was Kakashi to a 'T.' Why build a team with good dynamics when you can force the square peg through the round hole after you shave enough of the peg off.

"Perhaps after your traumatic experience our fathers can convince the Hokage of the wisdom in surrounding you with people you trust. Why you ask? No doubt you will appear to be an incredibly cold and distrustful person for the remaining time at the Academy and rarely associate with anybody you do not trust." Shino wouldn't mind being on his genin team again. Kiba may have been...trying at the best of times but he was a good and loyal friend to have, and they eventually developed an excellent working relationship with one another. Hinata was also an excellent teammate one she started coming out of her shell. 'Though after what Naruto-san told us she may retreat further into herself now that her reason for being strong has been removed.'

"One thing at a time Shino, let's just get past my birthday before we try to plan things out too much." Shino nodded his head while Shikamaru had been suspiciously quiet during the entire conversation.

"My parents will probably make a move to take you under their protection after it's done Ruto. I vaguely remembering overhearing my parents talk about you after this happened the first time around." He had been too lazy and unfocused to remember much of the conversation and only picked up that his parents were concerned that something else would happen to Naruto.

"That's fine, I was going to move out of my apartment after anyway, at least now I'll have a place to stay. I had planned on just moving into the woods and making my own home." It'd be simple enough with Mokuton and would be a good opportunity to get back into the habit of using his abilities.

There was nothing more that they could really plan for, so they continued with the plan they had and stepped up their training a bit. Determined to not let Gai see that they weren't taking his 'youthful' advice and earning themselves another lesson in the 'power of youth!'

In another part of the village a different meeting was underway. This meeting was held every year by a group of Leaf citizens to discuss one thing. The elimination of the Kyūbi as a threat. The number of people who attended this meeting to hear about the annual fox hunt changed from year to year and was a mixed bag of people from civilians to shinobi. This year there was quite the turnout. Haruno Mebuki had been working tirelessly on a new smear campaign targeting the blonde after her failed attempt to levy charges against him, and the people had flocked out in droves after hearing how the demon was slowly corrupting their children and would soon have an army at his disposal.

They had been working hard to observe the demon brat for weeks and had most of his favorite haunts watched. Ichiraku ramen, the demon's apartment, the Nara and Aburame compounds, the woods, one of the many unused training fields reserved for shinobi, and the Academy. The blonde's apparent association with the Nara and Aburame was enough to scare some of the less brave people away for fear of incurring any wrath from two of the oldest clans in Konoha. The rest however sneered at their association and blamed the blonde for turning them against the village.

Like all years a collection was taken up as a reward for whoever was the one who finally killed the demon. Anybody who wanted to participate had to pony up at least 2000 ryō. It wasn't much but over the years the pot had grown exponentially. Most of the shinobi who participated usually added

about 10,000 ryō to the pot. The risk was greater for them should they get caught and they wanted to make sure they were well rewarded if they were the one to kill the brat. This year the pot would near roughly 10 million ryō.

The plan this year was simple. They'd have somebody watching each of the demon's favorite places and follow him around and once the festival was in full swing those who had bought into the hunt would chase down the boy and kill him. The festival always provided a sufficient cover for their actions. It drew the attention of many of the active duty shinobi who had to take up policing the festival after the downfall of the Uchiha clan and if a bunch of sympathetic villagers just so happened to get too drunk and distract even more of the shinobi well who could blame them? With their plan set all that was left was to wait. This year, for sure they'd have their vengeance and it would be sweet.

October 10th. Naruto was 11 again today. Like he always did on his birthday he did not go to the Academy. In fact, he didn't venture to any of his usual haunts instead choosing to train in the forest all day. Nobody usually checked for him in the forest. He pretended not to notice the people who would take to following him around all day. 'Looks like they're going to follow me all day, might as well make them think I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary. It looks like its Horse's squad on my detail today. Well they won't be any help at all.'

Naruto decided he'd spend the day trying, and failing for his observers benefit, to do any of his training properly. This means screwing up target practice, repeatedly falling off the tree as he attempted to climb it, and miserably attempting to make some useless clones. Having spent the morning training 'Naruto' decided to head into town for some food. 'I'm only doing this to keep up the charade, not because I want some ramen. Definitely not because I want some ramen.' 'Naruto' quickly made his way to Ichiraku Ramen and sat down on his stool.

"Ah. If it isn't my favorite customer! How's training going Naruto?" Teuchi knew not to bring up Naruto's birthday around him. It was never a pleasant day for the blonde, so he tried his best to pretend it was just another day. A fact Naruto was grateful for.

"It's going well Teuchi-ojisan! I've almost got that pesky clone jutsu down! Two miso ramen with pork please old man." Teuchi laughed and ruffled his hair and set to work making him some ramen.

"Say where's Ayame-neesan ojisan?" The young ramen chef was conspicuously absent as she always tried to be around for his birthday even if they didn't do anything special for it.

"Oh, she's out running around town today picking up supplies for the store." Naruto set his head down on the counter waiting for his first bowl of ramen. As soon as it was ready Teuchi set the bowl down in front of the drooling blonde, "Eat up Naruto!" With a cry of 'itadakimasu' Naruto began to slurp up his ramen. He did the same with the second bowl when it appeared.

"Thanks for the ramen ojisan! It was awesome like always! Anyways, I got to get back to training so I can become Hokage faster!" He started to reach for some money knowing Teuchi would stop him and not let him pay today. Smiling brightly at the man he waved and made his way back to the woods for more 'training.' "Thanks again for the ramen old man! See you next time!"

After some more afternoon 'training' 'Naruto' was growing bored with his pretend training. Deciding instead to take a nap and wait for his attackers to appear before him. It should only be a couple more hours and there's no point in being tired during.

A few hours later the festival celebrating the Yondaime's victory began in full swing. People were celebrating and mourning which meant the alcohol was flowing freely for those who were of age. For those in the know it was a carefully orchestrated event when 'fights' would break out requiring the appearance of the shinobi who had to patrol the village during this time. For those blissfully unaware of the night's ulterior motive it just looked like people were having a good time.

Sarutobi Hiruzen had spent most of the day watching his young charge through his **Tōmegane no Jutsu (Crystal Ball Jutsu)** as his shadow clones went about doing paperwork. He was eternally grateful to Naruto and Shikaku for introducing the thought of having clones do the bulk of the paperwork allowing him more spare time. Except for when the festival began. It was one issue after another that apparently required his immediate attention. He wasn't concerned though he had a full team of ANBU watching Naruto this year. He had learned his lesson a few years ago when the energetic young boy had been left alone and thought he'd attend the festival. The results weren't pretty and Hiruzen had no desire for a repeat performance.

The appointed hour came and 'Naruto' was still sleeping peacefully in the forest as his watcher went to rally the troops. It wasn't hard. They had all agreed to meet in the same place as they did three days ago so they could move more quickly, and hopefully end the demon before the Hokage or the ANBU intervened on his behalf. They wouldn't go in one big group as that would attract unnecessary attention. They would all leave in small groups and make their way to a secondary meet up spot near wherever the demon was, in this case the forest. Slowly and methodically the group of about 100 civilians and a few shinobi made their way toward the forest where 'Naruto' was still resting. They thought it was awful convenient they wouldn't have to chase the demon very far before they could start to administer their justice. The festival was on the other side of the village and they were far from any observant eyes.

'Naruto' woke and sensed the approaching mob. They weren't even trying to be quiet. 'Guess the feel confident they can do what they want and get away with it. They're not wrong. Horse's team is the least attentive of my usual guard rotation.' As he was getting up and stretching, preparing to start the chase, a chūnin he didn't recognize dropped down in front of him and knocked him out. Or at least 'Naruto' pretended to fall unconscious and allowed himself to be carried deeper into the woods. The chūnin's chakra felt familiar but the physical appearance was throwing him off and they were doing a surprisingly good job of masking their signature. 'I wonder if they know I'm a sensor or just doing it out of habit?'

He could sense unease from one his ANBU guards and he didn't recognize the signature. 'Interesting seems there's a rookie on the team. Wonder how he'll react.' Indeed, there was a rookie who was frantically signing to his squad leader for instructions. The response he received was to do nothing yet. It did not help steady his nerves, but he obeyed nonetheless. There was no room in ANBU for those who couldn't follow orders.

Satisfied that he had taken 'Naruto' far enough into the woods the chūnin set about securing him to the tree with ninja wire. He was working extra hard to make sure the demon couldn't get away. After focusing more on the ninja's chakra signature Naruto had fight back the urge to laugh because the man restraining him to the tree was Mizuki. 'Figures he'd be here. No doubt he's been looking forward to tonight.' As soon as Mizuki finished tying him to the tree he signaled for the others to come and join him.

Soon enough the small clearing was full of people yelling and screaming for the demon to die. Mizuki woke 'Naruto' up by cutting his arm with a kunai. It wasn't meant to maim just be painful enough to rouse him. Taking that as his queue 'Naruto' woke up and proceeded to act the part of a scared 11-year-old confused and clueless as to why he was here. The crowd fed off his fear and started to cheer louder as one of them stepped forward and threw a bottle of Sake at him. The bottle shattered on his head as glass rained down on him. Some of it nicked his skin as it fell to the

ground.

Another not being satisfied walked forward to pick up one of the larger shards and shoved it into his gut. 'Naruto' couldn't help but scream as it hurt to have jagged glass forced into his stomach. At this point one of the shinobi in the crowd walked forward and yelled out at the crowd. "What are you doing!?" He turned toward Naruto, took out a tantō, and sliced across his neck. "You need to disable the vocal chords so he can't shout out." With that he vanished back into the crowd as they grew louder and bolder. 'Naruto' began to bleed from his neck and started letting out silent screams as person after person came forward to stab him or beat him.

At some point somebody had brought forward two horses and proceeded to attach a rope from the horses around his arms. Once attached and confident that they wouldn't slip off the horses were made to charge in opposite directions yanking his arms out of their sockets. They did his legs next before the horses were retired in favor of more stabbings.

It was not a good night for the newest member of the ANBU black ops. He had been called up to replace Lizard who the Jōnin Commander had apparently found lacking the necessary qualifications for life in black ops and one conversation with the ANBU Commander and Lizard found himself bumped down to genin and stuck doing D-rank missions for the next three months, if he didn't quit the force first. He hadn't even been allowed to paint his mask yet and he was growing increasingly concerned at his squad leader's lack of concern for their charge. It was making him incredibly uncomfortable to watch the crowd torture the boy and cheer as he started crying more freely. But obedience is key in ANBU. One mistake or disregard for orders in the field can get your entire squad captured or killed.

Feeling the civilians had had their turn at bringing justice to the demon, the shinobi decided to come forward. The man who had cut his vocal chords started electrocuting him with some low level Raiton techniques. They wouldn't kill him, but they'd certainly hurt. He took such delight in watching the demon twitch after his jutsu ended. The next one decided to test out a new Katon jutsu he was working on. Though his enjoyment wasn't as great as he couldn't hear the demon child cry as his flesh started to char and burn.

As the next shinobi approached and started using a water whip to lash the boy, the faceless ANBU having had enough of his captain's inaction jumped down and severed the man's hand with his tantō before the next lash could be felt. As he screamed in pain at the loss of his hand the ANBU took his tantō and slit his throat. He turned to the crowd and started leaking his killing intent at them daring them to challenge him. A couple decided to try their luck and charged the ANBU who had interfered in their righteous punishment of the demon child. He promptly educated them about their mistake as their lifeless bodies fell to the ground. He jumped back in front of the boy waiting for the next person to try. He was eventually joined by the rest of his squad, though he could tell Horse was angry at him. He didn't care. He'd rather face Horse than face the Hokage which they'd still have to do anyway, and he had no problems laying the blame at Horse's feet and praying the Hokage might be a bit more lenient with him. Seeing that the show was over the crowd dispersed and retreated back into their lives. "You shouldn't have done that Rook." He turned to start cutting the child free and tried to grab him as gently as he could when he started to fall. Not bothering to acknowledge his squad leader's reprimand he took off as quick as he could toward the hospital, hoping the boy's life could be saved.

What'll happen next? The aftermath of the fox hunt, the introduction of the 'new' Naruto, the Hokage getting serious, the last year at the academy, and team assignments. Perhaps some more depending on how long I want to make the next chapter. This one is a monster in comparison to the first two already longer than both of them combined.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

A/N: I'm not happy with parts of this chapter at all but no matter the number of rewrites I'm still not happy so I'm just getting it out of the way. Sorry. Maybe I'll be able to rewrite it in the future, but man have I been stuck on it for a while. I'd rather move forward than be stuck forever.

Since its come up several times by now I'll go ahead and address it. There will not be multiple partners in this story. Strictly Naruto and Shikamaru. Nor will I box them into top/bottom whatever you want to call it. There are reasons why Naruto is the way he is with Shikamaru that'll become apparent as the story progresses.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Talked to my lawyers, still no ownership of Naruto.

Chapter 4 – It's a Wonderful Life

On the other side of the village while 'Naruto' was being entertained by some of Konoha's finest; Shikamaru, Shino, and Naruto were having a relaxing evening in one of the deserted training grounds near the Nara compound. Shikamaru and Shino were once again playing shogi while Naruto was currently reading up on his father's notes on the **Shiki Fūjin (Dead Demon Consuming Seal)** trying to find a way to get Kurama's other half back. 'If Orochimaru found a way to release all the previous Hokage so can I.' "Shouldn't you guys be at the festival? Not like anybody is going to notice me while they're busy with my clone." Naruto never liked his birthday. He had no pleasant memories of them and by the time people started trying to make the day enjoyable it was far too late to matter. It was just another, usually painful, day to him.

"We are at the festival. You aren't the only one who can use **Kage Bunshin (Shadow Clone)** Naruto. It may drain us and therefore not be beneficial for us to use them, but we can so we did." Shikamaru didn't take his eyes of Shino or the board. Ever since they had returned Shino has been getting better and better at Shikamaru. While it was troublesome for Shikamaru, he enjoyed a challenge who wasn't his father. 'Never did manage to beat the old man before he died, maybe this time I will.' Shikamaru finally chose to sacrifice Shino's Silver General with his Lance. Shino would be able to take 3 of his pieces in the coming turns but it was better than losing 7.

Naruto looked up from his father's notes to glare at Shikamaru. He knew what he was really doing here. It was appreciative but also annoying. "I don't need to be babysat Shikamaru. I'm not going to get into any more trouble tonight." Naruto may be the clingy one in the relationship, but Shikamaru is definitely the mother hen. 'Well when you have Yoshin-san raising you I suppose its unavoidable.'

"It's not about babysitting you Naruto." He sent a sidelong glance at the blonde but kept his attention on what Shino was going to do. "It's about keeping you company on a difficult day." He turned back to the game as he listened to Naruto 'hrmph' and mumbled about lazy mother hens worrying over nothing.

Naruto set his book down and sat up. 'It seems the clone I left to watch my other clone has dispelled. Wow definitely don't remember it being *that* rough last time.' He stood up and dusted some of the dirt off his clothes. They decided against changing clothes until after today, so he was once more in his kill-me orange jumpsuit. "Well phase one has gone well. Although I think they were a little extra zealous in their administration of justice this time. It was not that intense last time around, but I am definitely glad my seal worked, and the clone survived." He noticed Shikamaru squirm uncomfortably at the news, no doubt concerned that things were even worse this time. "Getting those memories will not be pleasant." He turned to address Shino. "You were right Shino, I should've tried to find a way to disable the memory transfer." Sometimes shadow clones had a huge draw back but just making a sturdier shadow clone was difficult enough without trying to redesign the jutsu.

"What happened this time Naruto?" Shikamaru stood from the shogi board the game all but forgotten as he moved to stand before Naruto, unintentionally channeling a stance Yoshino often used when she demanded answers and wouldn't take any refusal. Seeing this Naruto began to recount what his clone had observed, and with each sentence he could see Shikamaru grow angrier and angrier. Even the usually difficult to anger Shino was letting out an angry buzzing noise. "Horse better hope my father doesn't find out he did nothing, he's gotten pretty protective of you Naruto. Started digging into your life last week." If anyone was surprised, they didn't show it.

Naruto knew. It wasn't hard for him to tell if somebody had taken a strong interest in him. His scent was all over his apartment one day, and he could sense Shikaku hanging around the Academy more and more. "Your father isn't as subtle as I would've thought he'd be Shika. Still it's nice to know somebody has taken enough interest to care about what's happening." And it was. When Naruto became Hokage and had started going through his old files to say he was disappointed and upset with his jiji would be an understatement. It was all there in black and white for the man, and he just didn't do anything. "In any case it's time for me to go into proper hiding, it wouldn't do to be caught outside the hospital so soon. My healing rate is incredible but not *that* incredible." At least it was when fuzzbutt was awake. "You two should head on home and I'll see you in a couple days after I sneak into the hospital to replace my clone." With that Naruto ran off with a quick wave leaving Shikamaru and Shino alone.

"If his injuries are worse than he remembers then we need to be more careful about what we change Shino. We've hardly done anything and already things are changing and not entirely for the better." Shikamaru was racking his brain about why things were already different from before. The only thing that had happened was that unexpected council meeting. 'Was that really enough to change things? I know Sakura's mother has it out for Naruto, but to have this much of an impact is unexpected.'

"It is possible we are not in our exact past. Why you ask? Naruto-san indicated we may not end up exactly where we meant to. Things may be similar but different enough to what we remember." There was still a lot that wasn't known about how they traveled back. Naruto had attempted to explain the theory, but it did not always make sense. Shikamaru still had a point though. "Perhaps its best if we focus on major events from now on

and avoid altering too much." Shikamaru nodded in agreement as they both moved to make their respective trips home.

Sarutobi Hiruzen was not pleased. The report he had just heard from Horse had the aged Hokage leaking an oppressive amount of killing intent and it was making the ANBU Captain incredibly nervous and uncomfortable. "I trust you can round up those responsible for this?" A quick 'yes' and the ANBU disappeared in a smokeless **Shunshin (Body Flicker)**. 'I am way too old for this shit.' His thoughts turned to his self-proclaimed grandson who had just gone through a horrific event if Horse's report was to be believed. He left a shadow clone in his office as he made his way out of the tower and toward the hospital, all the while chewing on his pipe.

He walked into the hospital and made his way toward Naruto's room. It was in fact known as Naruto's room. The hospital staff always put him in the same place. It was far from everybody else, to keep his location a bit more secure and to keep anyone else from harming more during his stay. The fact that Naruto had a room in the hospital set aside for his use was always troubling. No matter how hard Sarutobi tried to make the people realize he was just a boy it never seemed to work. Perhaps things got better for a little while but inevitably it got worse. As he neared Naruto's room he saw Cat drop down in front of him. "What news do you have for me Cat?"

"The medical team has done what they can for him, but they say it'll take time for him to heal and wake up. His injuries don't seem to be healing as quickly which suggests they were either more severe when he arrived, or something is interfering with his ability to heal." Hiruzen suspected that the Kyūbi was responsible for his increased healing rate, a small blessing, but the thought that something could be interfering with that was deeply worrying. As skilled and knowledgeable as he was in fūinjutsu the Yondaime Hokage had created a wonderfully puzzling seal that not even Jiraiya understood completely.

He was roused from his thoughts as Cat continued his report on the boy's injuries as he entered the room. "He suffered first and second degree burns on 23% of his body, has at least 47 different lacerations ranging in severity from mild to potentially life threatening, his limbs had been dislocated from their joints," Hiruzen's hardened features softened briefly as he caught sight of his grandson, relieved that he was alive, but they hardened once more as Cat continued his report. "some of his nerves show signs of damage, and there has been signs of delayed or incomplete responses to outside stimuli possibly suggesting electrocution or the brain attempting to block out some of the trauma, and his vocal chords have been damaged to the point they're unsure if he will regain the ability to speak."

Sarutobi Hiruzen stood staring at his grandson as he digested the information. Naruto was presently laying in a hospital bed. Every inch of him was covered in white bandages except for his head. His face was the only part of him that was marginally spared injury, but he could still make out the tell-tale sign of jagged cuts across his whisker marks. "If I may ask sir. How did the ANBU team lose sight of him long enough for this to happen?" Cat was remarkably good at keeping his emotions in check but even the best trained shinobi have tells that indicate their moods. Cat was subtly shifting his shoulders as he ran through all the injuries no doubt dreading the Hokage's response. The injuries to what he viewed as a child unnerved him, but he was more annoyed that the ANBU were apparently incapable of keeping an eye on an 11-year-old child.

He relit his pipe with a minor Katon jutsu. "It would seem Naruto slipped away from the notice of the ANBU again and this time it was a costly mistake. They did not find him until after the damage had been done." He let out of a puff of smoke. "Cat you will be responsible for Naruto's safety while he is here. Bring Dog back if you feel you have to, he is not to be left alone again." Cat nodded in acknowledgement of his new mission. "I want to be notified as soon as he awakens, I don't care when it is or what I'm doing. I want to know." He turned to leave intent on heading back to his office, as Cat disappeared into the shadows to assume his post. 'I am way too old to deal with this shit. How I wish one of my students would return to take my place.'

Naruto currently faced a dilemma. How to sneak into his hospital room and replace his clone while under the ever-watchful eyes of Cat and Dog. 'Seems Yamato-taicho actually got Kaka-sensei to watch over me for a bit.' He was happy to see that there were people who were going to take their duties seriously when it came to him even if it was two of his former future teachers, but he was cursing their attentiveness right now. Sneaking in wasn't the problem. A simple **Henge (Transformation)** and flooding the area with his chakra and none's the wiser. Naruto would never be able to suppress his chakra without support of seals to remain undetected which made infiltration more difficult, but not impossible. At the moment his control was nowhere near good enough to do it, but he had developed an ingenious solution to his problem. Rather than suppress his chakra Naruto flooded the area with his chakra. Essentially making him background noise that over time shinobi became accustomed to and simply ignored.

Presently Naruto was disguised as a nurse pretending to be filling out paperwork after having grabbed a couple of random charts from rooms he passed by, one of which was his own, as he was observing the guard detail assigned to his room. He'd have to make sure he was wrapped appropriately to hide his nonexistent injuries. The report was remarkably thorough, and he suspected that Yamato or Kakashi were the ones to fill it out and not any of the regular staff.

Sneaking by Cat wasn't the real problem. He rarely stood watch in the room preferring to hide in the tree outside. No, the problem, as it often was, was Dog. Kakashi wasn't one of the best jōnin in the village for nothing. His observation skills are top notch, they had to be for someone of his specialties, thus his dilemma. How does one sneak past somebody trained and honed through countless missions to notice even the smallest disturbance in his surroundings. **Kawarimi (Replacement)** was out, the surge in chakra would be easily noticeable. Nor could Naruto go in disguised as the nurse as he doubted he could reliably mask his scent from Kakashi. Just letting the clone dispel would also create problems, namely revealing that it was a clone. The original plan of causing a disturbance with Shino and Shikamaru would also have to be tossed out. Kakashi wouldn't leave that room for anything short of an S-ranked mission or seeing one of his former teammates again.

The only saving grace was that even someone like Kakashi had to eat or sleep some time. Not knowing how long it had been since he did either though wasn't encouraging. If Naruto didn't replace his clone within the next couple days, they would undoubtedly begin to suspect there was an issue when he wasn't healing as quickly. 'Dumb fox and his time travel induced coma.' He missed his furry companion and was looking forward to hearing him gripe again. Naruto decided to leave and apply the appropriate bandaging to his real person before he would return later under a new disguise.

It would be another 14 hours before Kakashi finally had to leave to eat and rest. His replacement was an unfamiliar ANBU wearing the mask of the Hare. 'Of course. A rabbit.' Thoughts of Kaguya had sullied the image of adorable fluffy bunnies. Naruto didn't remember Hare so either they died before he knew them, or they were new. 'Why oh why can't one thing in my life be easy?' In comparison to most aspects of his life this situation would barely be a footnote. Nevertheless, he was presently frustrated.

Naruto would eventually be saved through a fortunate, or unfortunate depending on your perspective, sequence of events. First, one of the other shinobi in the hospital was thoroughly convinced they were fine and didn't need to waste time hanging around and tried to leave. Aversion to

hospitals was not an uncommon trait amongst shinobi. Then said shinobi collapsed from a combination of chakra exhaustion and severe injuries. The hospital staff of course was quick to bring him back into the building before placing him in the same wing as Naruto. Lastly, said shinobi objected more forcefully at being in the hospital after they regained consciousness. It was here that Naruto's opportunity came. Since this part of the hospital was usually deserted, and for good reason, it was used to monitor the more troublesome patients. This had the unfortunate effect of reducing the amount of staff in this section. So, when patients become difficult to manage and there's some nearby ANBU their assistance is often required. Being new to this particular duty, Hare decided to intervene. This of course meant leaving his charge alone. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth Naruto quickly made his way into his room to replace his clone. Hare would return sometime later unaware of any changes.

Shikaku stood impatiently in the Hokage's outer office again. Unlike last time he was here for one reason and one reason only. Uzumaki Naruto. They had done well to keep his injuries quiet so much so that it went unknown for two days before the word started to spread. It's damn near impossible to keep a secret in a hidden village, as ironic as that fact is. One would think living in a shinobi village secrecy would be held to a higher regard. Alas the civilians and shinobi alike love their gossip. Eventually word spread all around the village of how close they had come to being rid of the demon.

Shikaku had managed to get ahold of the incident report, and for whatever reason he wasn't supposed to. Apparently even for him things were classified when it came to Naruto. 'It's odd. I got my hands on every other report but this one and a few others, and suddenly I'm being shut out.' Being a clan head and the jōnin commander comes in handy when you want to get your hands on some sensitive information. If the nature of this report was any indication of what the others hid, then obviously somebody didn't want knowledge of Naruto's repeated injuries to get out. 'Since nobody in this village seems to care about his wellbeing I have to assume it's really a means to get those of us who tried to care from him to keep from pressing the issue harder. So long as he's taken care of there wouldn't be complaints.'

Naruto's recent hospitalization two days ago forced Shikaku to move his meeting with the Hokage up. The Hokage had a new secretary which begged the question of what happened to the last one. Nobody just quits being personal assistant to the Hokage no matter how much the job sucks. The unknown woman interrupted his thoughts. "The Hokage will see you now." Pushing the thought from his mind he made his way into the office.

One look at the old man sitting behind the desk and Shikaku knew he hadn't slept last night, perhaps not even in days. It was difficult to tell with how tired he looked given his age. "Hokage-sama." The customary greeting was accompanied by a full bow to his leader.

"Shikaku, what can I do for you today?" If his look belied so much of his age than his voice confirmed it. The Hokage was growing old, dangerously so. It only reaffirmed Shikaku's decision to come here. Somebody must act in the best interest of Naruto and if the Hokage couldn't, or wouldn't, then he would. Consequences be damned.

He walked forward to set a stack of folders on the old man's desk. It seemed cruel to pile even more paperwork on him, but he'd have to deal with it. "Just thought I'd drop off some light reading regarding our favorite blonde and to bring some other troubling matters to your attention." The Hokage set aside one of the many requests he had just denied from the council to pick up the file on top of the new stack of paperwork. Despite what the contents of the files were about Shikaku had to restrain from laughing at the look that spread across his leader's face as he started in on the new stack. He waited patiently and quietly for the Hokage to read the summary of his findings, but not even through the first page he could tell the following conversation wouldn't be pleasant. The next three didn't improve the Hokage's mood any.

The Hokage set the last page down and levied a heavy glare at Shikaku after lighting up his pipe. "You've been busy then haven't you Shikaku?" It was a mix of statement and accusation. Shikaku knew some of his findings and criticisms ultimately led back to the Hokage. Depending on the Kage such things could get you killed. Not likely with the Sandaime Hokage, but one could never know. Shikaku wasn't as fool to believe that he was always going to play the kind grandfather he presented to the world.

"Yes sir." There was no point in trying to lead this dance so Shikaku decided he'd follow. He returned the Hokage's glare with a look that hopefully convinced the Hokage that he wouldn't be cowed so easily for this. Still one does not get into a glaring contest with the 'Kami no Shinobi' and expect to win.

Shikaku watched and noted which files the Hokage set aside. The first to be moved were Naruto's medical records. 'So, he's already familiar with them. Troublesome. Part of me was hoping he was unaware of his bad things were but if he just sets it aside then he knows all of it.' The next to go were reports of how the shopkeepers and most of the Academy instructors behave and treat Naruto, another tick formed in Shikaku's mind. He did however open the one regarding his evaluation of the Academy curriculum. 'Well some progress is better than none.' The Hokage seemed to pour over each page of the report taking his opinion seriously.

He set his pipe down so he could speak more clearly. "I can't say I agree with continuing to use the shortened war time books in the curriculum, but neither can I say I agree with your assessment that it's too weak and ineffective. We are not at war and do not need to be pushing potential recruits so hard so early."

It was a somewhat logical argument. In war you need manpower and you don't have time to wait years for a shinobi to be trained to be ready, so you lower standards to inflate the numbers and increase your combat capability. For three or four shinobi that ordinarily wouldn't cut it, you could potentially save a whole squad of more experienced and better trained troops. Quantity over quality works in better protecting the quality, and whoever survives at the end of the war can potentially improve and become more valuable. The problem comes in when you keep neglecting the quality of your troops. The poorly trained would soon outnumber those that received adequate training and if the overall quality of your army drops then so does its effectiveness. The last war ended 20 years ago and the quality of the shinobi coming out of the academy weren't adequate as far as Shikaku was concerned, and he believed the statistics reflected that.

"Forgive me Hokage-sama, but what's to stop us from being at war tomorrow? Or five minutes from now? Hell, for all we know Iwa or Kumo are already waltzing through our territory." After all the best way to wage war was never to announce you were at war. Surprise attacks, if successful, were often effective and devastating and if you can capitalize on a surprised and unprepared opponent victory is usually swift and easy. "The way the Academy is now is not going to prepare us for the future. Sure, the graduation rate has increased to near idyllic levels, but if you look at the reports from the jōnin test you'd be lucky if more than 40% of recruits entered the roster, and I'm sorry but a 60% failure rate is unacceptable. It's a waste of time and resources we could better devote to the 40% that deserve it. The way things look right now I'd be surprised if more than one team made it through this year; and even then, its only because one is a Hyūga and a prodigy at that, a workaholic that Gai has taken under his wing, and a young kunoichi in training who takes her career choice seriously. The rest won't make the cut, and if they do they'll die on their first mission outside the village."

It was a harsh assessment, but it was honest in his opinion. The academy had subpar fitness standards that weren't enforced, fangirlism was rampant, every class had a genius or a prodigy despite no indication that they displayed such characteristics and instead it's made by the instructors, and they spent too much time on theory and not enough time on practical skills. The problem lay in making the Hokage see that. "Hokage-sama if its allowed to continue in this way by the time the next war comes around, and it will, we won't be ready for it. The field evaluations of active duty shinobi aren't that encouraging when you combine it with this." It was difficult to admit that last fact, as much as the Hokage was responsible for the training of potential shinobi it was his job as jōnin commander to make sure they didn't stagnate, and he hadn't been doing his job all that well recently.

"What would you have me do Shikaku? The other nations may have recovered from the last war, but to pile the Kyūbi attack on top of recovery and we're still not at pre-war levels." Another valid point, it's hard to go back to pre-war training levels when you still haven't recovered. After the Kyūbi incident it was decided that the standards which had at least been higher than now be dropped to allow more recruits through the program. "On top of that the civilians have a valid argument about the Academy being too difficult for non-shinobi families to meet. As for the genin who fail the actual exam that is why we have a reserve corps in the first place. To give them the opportunity to train and improve their skills."

"That's a ridiculous argument Hokage-sama. Correct me if I'm wrong but wasn't the Yondaime not an orphan? He didn't even have a family to support him and yet he quickly rose through the ranks and became the youngest Kage across the nations." Lowering standards because they're 'difficult' is asking for trouble. The reason they were so high is because this job demands it. Life as shinobi is wrought with danger and uncertainty. "More importantly Hokage-sama why the hell are you allowing the civilian council to have any say in what goes on at a *shinobi* academy." It was one of the many decisions that puzzled Shikaku, not because he didn't agree with them but because it just made no sense. "You don't see us teaching at trade schools explaining that the best way to build a wall is to make use of '**Doton: Doryūheki (Earth Style: Mud Wall)**' and expecting people to accept that as reasonable."

Shikaku's opinion of the reserve genin corps was somewhat more pessimistic than the genin corps. "As for the reserves Hokage-sama, how do you expect them to improve with no support? They get sidelined in the reserves and told to improve their skills. What the hell does that mean? They may be shinobi but their still children and if their families have no history as shinobi how do you expect them to better themselves?" They were essentially tossed aside in favor of more capable candidates and left to fend for themselves. "The genin section of the library is devoid of anything other than empty shelves with a book thrown about here or there. Very few jōnin, or chūnin, bother to take an interest in the reserves to try and help them for the simple fact they don't want to put in the amount of work necessary to bring them up to acceptable standards. The simple truth is sir, that of the 60% who fail and get sent to the reserve corps less than 20% remain as active shinobi."

The Hokage seemed to agree with him there. Civilians influencing the shinobi curriculum was counterintuitive. They didn't have experience as shinobi, understand the dangers with being a shinobi, and most seemed to only push their children to be shinobi to increase their own prestige with unrealistic expectations of what it means to be a shinobi. Shinobi lie, steal, kill. They live in the darkness, the tales of heroism and noble victories, while true, are grossly exaggerated. They ignore all the blood, shit, and pain that comes with such victories. "I see your point Shikaku, but it's not like I can just change the Academy curriculum at the drop of a hat. A new curriculum would have to be developed, a new curriculum means new textbooks, new training for instructors, possibly requiring improved or new facilities, all of that will take time and money." The Hokage rested his chin on the back of his hands. 'Not to mention it would create so much paperwork for me!'

Shikaku had been prepared for that argument and it wasn't going to deter him. He pulled out what is essentially his trump card against the Academy and tossed it toward the Hokage. "I'm not asking you to change it overnight Hokage-sama, but *that*," he sneered and gestured toward the book that had just been thrown, "has no place anywhere near the Academy." The small book had landed amongst the Hokage's paperwork and he looked panicked for a moment that it might disrupt the delicate stacks.

The Hokage picked up the Academy textbook, it was alarmingly thin but first year books often were. However, after he started glancing through it he became increasingly more concerned. "What is this Shikaku?" His voice betrayed his calm exterior. The inside was horrifying and the thought that this was what was being used to teach the students even more so. Worst of all it wasn't a first-year book it was a second or third year book from what he could tell. It was filled with nothing but useless information, cartoons depicting safe weapon handling, and poorly described or even incomplete instructions on basic trap making. He didn't even want to think what else was at the back of the book.

"That Hokage-sama is a third-year book issued to each student. The *entire* year is in *that*." Shikaku didn't even want to call it a book. He barely wanted to acknowledge its existence. "I know I'm asking a lot of you sir, but this cannot continue. We cannot possibly hope to train a strong shinobi using that. Trust me when I say you don't want to see the other books." And it was true. Shikaku had read all of them or tried to anyway. After the first few it was difficult to get through them all without having the urge to light them on fire.

Hiruzen promptly deposited the book in the trashcan beneath his desk. "Very well Shikaku, we will begin revamping the Academy curriculum. We probably won't be able to get something developed and implemented with the current classes, so those entering years five and six will have no choice but to contend with the current curriculum. Even with the earlier years we can't change things too drastically suddenly, except the first years, we'll have to make do with remedial classes during their breaks." It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was the best outcome Shikaku could have hoped for all things considered. It would be difficult for them to figure out how long things have been this way, but there was no point in assigning blame. Better to address and fix the issue. "I'll have to speak to the publisher about who exactly implemented these changes." Suffice it to say it would not be a pleasant conversation for them. The Hokage had set the rest of Shikaku's work to the side as he had other work to complete. It was a subtle dismissal.

Shikaku was pleased some positive changes would be made. 'I only hope it's not too late. As much as I dislike Danzō and his war mongering, he's right in that the next war will break out sooner or later.' In comparison with the conversation he just had, this next one promised to be even more troublesome. The Hokage having apparently noticed Shikaku's still being there looked back up from his paperwork. "Is there something else troubling you Shikaku?"

Shikaku sighed, but there was no point avoiding it any longer. "Uzumaki Naruto." It was easy enough to believe that the Hokage knew this was coming. This entire meeting had been arranged solely because of the boy. "I figured it would at least be prudent of me to inform you that we'll take care of him from now on." Truthfully it would have been easier just leave the Hokage in the dark, but better to be upfront with the most powerful man in the village especially if you're dealing with a village asset and potentially destabilizing the political structure within the village.

A deeper frown sat on his face. "Oh? Who exactly is this 'we'?" It had come up before, but not in many years after the last time the Hokage had shot down any attempt by a clan to hold influence over Naruto.

"We, as in Yoshino and myself." It was important to distance this as much as possibly from the Nara clan. Though Shikaku knew most would support him, it wasn't a matter of support. Sadly, it all boiled down to Naruto and politics. The Hokage couldn't just let one clan or another be

guardian of Naruto, and that meant the boy was left to suffer.

"You know I cannot allow that Shikaku. It would disrupt the stability within the village too much to have Naruto placed under your clan's care." The Hokage's voice was stern and warning.

Shikaku couldn't back down now though. "Which is why he's not being placed under our care. We're simply going to provide for him since nobody else is willing to." It was a hurtful jab meant for the Hokage and he knew it. "We will not adopt or become the *official* guardian of him, merely make sure he has someplace safe to stay and food to eat. Something he clearly lacks right now. I suppose I should also point out I'm not asking for your permission Hokage-sama, merely informing you of it." This was the dangerous part. Defying the Hokage could mean death, if you're lucky. The unlucky ones got to entertain Ibiki or Anko for a very long time until they died or were forgotten about in one of the many cells. "I'm well aware of all the official bullshit you want to use to object to this, and I don't care. Not anymore. I stood aside before because I thought and felt assured that you, as Hokage, would be able to nurture him the right way. I have never regretted anything more than I do my own inaction on this matter." It was quite the statement given some of his past actions. Shikaku had nearly been the reason his entire squad had been killed, and he vowed to never be found in that situation again because of his inadequacies. "After Naruto is released from the hospital he'll be staying with my family until we find him a better place to live. Even if I have to build him a damn home to do it." Not waiting to hear anymore from the Hokage, he quickly bowed and left the room.

He made it out of the building and started walking home. "Well no ANBU are here to haul me off to a cell...yet. I do hope Yoshino won't be too upset if I widow her."

Sarutobi Hiruzen found himself once again walking down the hospital hallway toward Naruto's room. Cat had sent word that the boy has finally woken up. His trip to the hospital was filled with anticipation and trepidation. The last time Naruto had woken up in the hospital he seemed so broken and that was barely two months ago...and now he was waking up again only this time he had been tortured. His recent conversation with Shikaku still fresh in his mind. He was torn over what to do. As the Hokage he couldn't just let Shikaku and his wife watch out for him. Officially or not it would alter the balance between clans. As a grandfather though he wanted nothing more than to take care of the boy. He reached the door to a place he had come to dread. He took one more puff from his pipe and walked inside. "Hello Naruto-kun." He tried to make his voice sound as normal as possible as he slid the door closed behind him.

The boy in question barely spared him a passing glance before returning to staring intently at the corner where an ANBU was concealed. "Hokage-sama." If he had thought the boy, he met here two months ago was worrying than the one who lay before him was nothing short of a disaster. He never took his eyes away from the corner and appeared as if he was trying to glare the ANBU to death.

The Hokage moved to stand at the end of the bed, blocking Naruto's view of the ANBU. "How are you feeling Naruto-kun."

"How do you think I'm feeling Hokage-sama?" The tone was cold, empty, and a tad bit resentful. As much as he had prepared for this eventuality it didn't help him deal with the memory. Torture was still torture whether it was a clone or the original. The only trauma that went away was the physical, the emotional trauma remained.

The Hokage took another long drag from his pipe. "I know it's difficult Naruto-kun, but it will get better." A lie. If things haven't gotten better by now it's doubtful they ever will. In reality things were getting progressively worse, but he couldn't think that way he had to maintain his belief that eventually it really would get better.

"When exactly will it get better Hokage-sama?" Before Naruto might have believed him, but he had been young and naïve. Clinging to false hope because he didn't have anything else to hold on to. "From where I'm sitting things will never get better."

"It will just take time Naruto-kun. They just don't understand..." Naruto didn't give him the opportunity to finish.

"What don't they understand Hokage-sama? Everyone else seems to know what they don't understand! Yet I am not allowed to understand what they don't understand!?" He knew he shouldn't yell, but he always tended to wear his emotions on his sleeve when he became overly frustrated or annoyed. That had always been the most frustrating part of being a jinchūriki. He simply wasn't allowed to know anything. Not what he was, not why he was hated, not anything about his life. "Why do they hate me, Hokage-sama? What have I ever done to them to deserve this?" He hated sounding like a child. He knew why he was hated, and he knew the answer to his second question. Even so he wanted someone to tell him.

The Hokage was cursing himself for even hinting that he knew why he was hated. He couldn't risk telling him, especially not now. "You've done nothing Naruto." He would try just ignoring his slip and pray that Naruto does as well. "I'm afraid I can't begin to tell you why..."

"If you aren't even going to bother to tell me, or lie well, Hokage-sama, just stop talking." The old man just never seems to learn. Even now Horse is still waltzing around from what Naruto can tell. Either the Hokage is an idiot, or Horse lied on the report confident that Naruto was unaware of his presence. If there was one thing Naruto knew the Hokage wasn't, it was an idiot. "Better yet, if you're just going to lie to me you can leave. You can take the ANBU with you as well." He leaned around the Hokage as best he could given his condition, he was supposed to still be severely injured even by his standards. "I only trust three of your ANBU at this point and only one is nearby right now."

The ANBU in the corner flinched at the lack of trust and resentment of the boy's tone, and that he had been detected as he thought; the Hokage however, wasn't convinced that Naruto was capable of sensing their presence or remembering that day clearly. "I can assure you Naruto-kun that Horse and his team were there to protect you and it was just unfortunate that you slipped away as you usually do."

Naruto couldn't help but snort at that. "Tell me Hokage-sama, why on earth would I try to 'slip away' from my protection detail if I wasn't supposed to be aware that I was being followed in the first place? It's not like I haven't learned by now to make myself scarce on October 10th. So why would I try and endanger myself?" Naruto decided he'd have to convince the old man that he *could* sense the many ANBU that had been following him. "Unless of course you believe I'm not capable of sensing their presence. Well allow me to educate you. Cat is outside hiding on a nearby tree, partially at least the rest of him is hidden within the tree from what I can tell, a truly interesting ability as far as I know only one other person has been able to do something like that." Naruto enjoyed the surprised look on the Hokage's face as he realized Naruto knew about Tenzō. "Obviously, Hare is behind you in the corner where you conveniently positioned yourself to block my view of him. There's an ANBU down the hall either posing as a nurse or is really a nurse. I still haven't been able to figure that out. Either way it's a very effective and useful position that they're in. Lastly Dog, at least I think its Dog, has been reading out in the hospital garden all morning as far as I can tell. It's been awhile since I've felt him around but it's what he usually likes to do."

"I see. Quite an impressive ability you have there Naruto-kun." It was indeed an impressive ability, but it presented problems. Who knows what else

he might be hiding if he isn't bringing up his own capabilities. "I must say I don't like the thought that you've been keeping secrets from me though."

At that Naruto actually burst out in laughter. "Really? You mean you don't like being deceived, and having lies spoken to your face? I never would have guessed that you would think such behavior rude." It was a straightforward message. You keep secrets and I'll keep secrets. Now it would be a game of seeing who would cave first. Naruto was confident it wouldn't be him. After all he already knew all the secrets the Hokage could reveal to him, but the secrets Naruto might be hiding were of far greater concern to him.

The Hokage was growing frustrated at Naruto's cheekiness. "Please do not try to play games with me Naruto-kun." His greatest fear right now was that Kyūbi was influencing his behavior. "I'll have to call Jiraiya back to inspect the seal." "Are you keeping anymore secrets Naruto-kun?"

Yes. Many in fact. "No, Hokage-sama." Naruto had reigned back in his emotions and made it as difficult as possible to tell if he was lying or not. The Hokage though remained unconvinced.

"In any case I would like to hear more about what you remember from that night." It was clear the boy knew when he was being followed so the thought that his orders were so blatantly disregarded was not a welcome addition. He listened to Naruto recount the day from his perspective. Deciding that Ibiki and Anko could use something more challenging he had Cat appear and ordered him to find Horse and his squad minus one and take them to entertain their new friends. He kept listening as Naruto described what he had been subjected to as he stood impassively absorbing the information. At the very least Horse's description of events matched up with the rest of what he had been told. "That's quite enough for now Naruto-kun." He turned to start walking out of the room. "I should be letting you rest."

Naruto watched as he made his way toward the door. "When I'm attacked again Hokage-sama, I'm going to defend myself. In every way I know how. I promise I won't kill anybody unless it can't be helped." He could tell his words had an effect on the aged leader and that it was a disturbing one. 'No doubt he's convinced I'm being influenced by Kyūbi now. He just doesn't want to believe that even I have a breaking point.' He turned to lay on his side facing away from the door deciding to tell whoever else came to see him to leave. "I'll stay here two more days. After that I'll be going home, approval or not." He heard the door slide open and closed again with no response.

True to his word he stayed in the hospital for another two days before slipping out the window. His faithful shadows followed him but otherwise didn't interfere with him. Classes at the Academy had been canceled for the week, so the teaching staff could try to develop a more comprehensive curriculum to fold into the existing one after it was found to be well below desired levels. This left Naruto three days to himself before he had to return. Walking through the village he knew word had spread of his injuries. Many looked at him with a hint of smugness and joy that he had been injured, while others continued to look at him with hate no doubt upset that he survived. For the most part people left him alone satisfied that he had been sufficiently punished for the moment. It was a temporary peace that Naruto was grateful for, but he knew it wouldn't last.

He made it back to his apartment to find the door wide open and his apartment in tatters. It was expected. Trash had been thrown about the room, the few possessions he had had been smashed to pieces, the door itself was hanging by a single hinge, the sink was presently spraying water after somebody had obviously damaged the pipes, and there was a considerable amount of water on the floor. Rather than make a fuss about it Naruto set about cleaning up the mess. It was midmorning when he left the hospital and cleaning up his apartment would take the rest of the day.

After he finished and fixed himself a dinner consisting of instant ramen, he set about to his new start. 'First order of business: getting rid of all their monitoring devices and seals.' The first time around Naruto had been completely unaware of the many attempts that were made to monitor him when he was young. It hadn't been till Shikamaru became his advisor and had begun to dig into Danzō that he even found out. The reports didn't paint a flattering picture of his life and solidified Naruto's belief that more attempt was made at controlling him than helping him. 'Wow. 17 different means to try and monitor me. I must say I'm truly surprised given how small my apartment is.' It was definitely overkill. A mix of seals and listening devices had been hidden all throughout his apartment, mostly in the kitchen/living room, but there was one in the bathroom and even a camera in his bedroom. One by one Naruto found and destroyed them all, though he would never be certain he had found all of them.

'Second: make this place as secure as possible.' Pulling out the supplies he'd need to make use of fūinjutsu he sat at the kitchen table. Naruto began by designing a stasis seal that would make it nearly impossible to damage anything it had been attached to so long as there was chakra to keep it charged. That was meant for the door, door knob, window, window pane, floor, ceiling, and of course the walls. 'Some of the villagers were dogged in their determination to harass me.' Next was a simple chakra identifying seal that would allow for specified individuals to make changes to the objects marked with the stasis seals. It'd be inconvenient not to be able to open the door or window after all. Following that was a seal that would discourage attempts to force their way in or damage his property. This seal was simple in that if anybody attempted to break in they would receive a mild shock. If that wasn't enough to discourage them then it'd really ramp up to the point of near electrocution. The final stage was actual electrocution that would render them unconscious and Naruto added a component to the seal that would alert him that somebody had tried to break in. 'It won't do to have unconscious people hanging around outside my apartment all day while I'm not here. Not that I plan on being here, but appearances are important to maintain.' The coup de grâce of the entire package was another seal that would alert him if any of the other seals failed, were interrupted, removed, or otherwise interfered with.

Once finished designing his seals Naruto went around applying them to the many surfaces that he sought to protect. In truth he didn't need to draw the seals on paper or with ink. He could have used his chakra to design and apply the seal to each object. The traditional way was simply easier and less taxing on his chakra, and it was easier to copy and apply a seal with a physical medium. Limitless his reserves may be, but it was never wise to be wasteful, a lesson Naruto had learned many times over the years. Satisfied that his apartment was protected from non-shinobi threats, Naruto crawled into bed for the night. Tomorrow would be the first day of his new life and it was hard not to be excited despite what he knows is waiting.

Sarutobi Hiruzen had not been having a good time of it lately. The civilian council was in a mood after he made his intent to completely revamp the Academy standards. Shikaku had revealed deficiencies in the overall training of the regular shinobi forces, mainly that most *didn't* train at all anymore. More troubling than all of that was half of the requests that had found its way to his desk. Now that he was actually capable of reading every piece of paper that came his way he was becoming increasingly irritated by the council's attempts to shift things more in their favor. It made him wonder what things he allowed to slip through just to get rid of the offending papers in his past. He was so concerned he had asked Danzō to lend him some of his, nonexistent, shinobi that excelled in administration to review every law, every decree, and every piece of paper that had been signed bore his signature since he resumed his post as Hokage. Most concerning was that Danzō agreed without fuss. 'Danzō agreeing with me on anything is never a good sign.' Still his paperwork was now efficiently organized into matters that needed his attention, those that could wait, and that which can be summarily shredded or set on fire. He found that he had free time again and it was wonderful.

"You summoned me Hiruzen." Sarutobi looked up from some of the proposed changes he was considering making at the Academy. The

emotionless and dry tone of his former friend turned rival was not surprising anymore.

"Yes. I have use of your Root. Particularly those skilled in administration." He allowed himself a small smile at the faint sign of surprise that Danzō allowed himself to show. It wasn't much, and most would have missed it. But Sarutobi Hiruzen was still the Kami no Shinobi and didn't get that title by being a slouch. Being able to get any kind of reaction out of the man was an accomplishment in anybody's book.

Danzō casually walked forward to take a seat in front of Hiruzen. "I've no idea what you mean old friend." He wasn't about to acknowledge or surrender his shinobi to Hiruzen simply because he asked. "My program was shut down years ago. I know you've grown senile in your old age, but even you must remember shutting it down."

'So, we are going to play our games even now eh Danzō?' Hiruzen may have been old, and may have grown soft, but he was not a fool and did not like being taken for one. "I'm well aware you ignored my orders to disband Root, as I knew you would, and merely took the organization underground. A fitting location for a strong foundation wouldn't you say?" He knew that Danzō knew he had no intention of shutting down Root. After all he had made his orders to Danzō very publicly and very loudly. "I allowed you to continue your program in secret as it was quite useful to the Leaf. Is it still useful Danzō?" The not so subtle threat was clear. 'So long as you remain useful and loyal you are allowed to do as you please.' After all, having a black ops division you could deny all knowledge of and disavow any action they take was incredibly useful for a shinobi village.

Danzō, in a rare moment, allowed a small smile to play on his face. "So, you are not as weak willed as you appeared to have become. I commend you on playing a superb game Hokage-sama." He rose to his feet. "Very well I shall have some of my shinobi report to you by the end of the day. Will there be anything else?" For a man not easily impressed or expressive that was high praise.

"Yes. A new secretary who will manage the nonsense that comes across my desk." Too many useless and pointless items found its way onto his desk. No doubt many hoped to exploit him during a time of rubber stamping. Unfortunately for them those times have ended. "The rest will go through every law, every decree, every edict, and every piece of paper that bares my signature since the time I resumed my post." It was going to be a lot of paper.

Danzō nodded. "I hear you are planning to restructure the Academy curriculum." It was a statement of fact, not an opinion. "I am genuinely pleased to see that something has roused you from your slumber." He took out a folder and set it on the Hokage's desk. "A few recommendations you will no doubt ignore for the new curriculum. I shall have your new staff report first thing in the morning." With his piece said he turned and walked out of the room to return to managing his nonexistent black ops division.

Despite having cured his bureaucratic nightmare of paperwork he now faced a bigger problem. Much of his authority he had signed away to the council. Looking back, he can see how it made sense at the time. The village had just been devastated by the Kyūbi not long after the war had ended. Giving them more control of the economic concerns allowed him to focus on the military side of the village. The problem now was that it appeared the council was abusing their power and had been for years, and worse still he wasn't sure he could wrest control back from them. Hence his new-found cooperation with Danzō. It would be quite a while before his new administrative staff made its way through everything that had been passed in the past twelve years so there was little else to do about it for the moment.

Confident that he could begin to correct any of his previous bureaucratic mistakes his thoughts turned toward his most troubling concern. Uzumaki Naruto. True to his word he had stayed in the hospital for two more days before he slipped out the window followed closely by Hare. Soon after he was informed that the monitoring of his apartment had ended abruptly. Evidently the boy had found out he was being watched and decided he didn't appreciate it. 'I wonder how poorly you must think of me now Minato, Kushina.' He wasn't sure what he should do about him. On the one hand he wanted to leave him be and let him live his life. The other part of him knew he couldn't.

As a jinchūriki Naruto's position in the village was tenuous at best. He wouldn't put it past the boy to run. Such an eventuality could not be allowed to happen. Not only did he imprison the most powerful of bijū, but he was the only son of perhaps the Leaf's greatest Hokage since the Shodai. Recent events had made Hiruzen question his decision to conceal his heritage. True enough Iwa or Kumo would have jumped at the chance to kill or kidnap the boy had it been made public that he was Minato's child; but things in the village were hardly kind to him, and if they knew he was Minato's son their stance on him would undoubtedly shift. At least it would have. 'If I reveal such information now they would probably assume the Kyūbi has decided to wear the Fourth's skin to taunt them.'

He stood up and turned around to stare out the window at his village. After his conversation with Naruto in the hospital he had sent a message recalling Jiraiya to inspect the status of the seal. There was the possibility that Naruto was aware of his burden and was being influenced by the Kyūbi. It wouldn't be a stretch for the beast to try and influence its host in a bid for freedom. He doubted it was the case, but it was prudent to be evaluate how strong and stable the seal was.

'Getting to Naruto will be quite problematic if the reports are to be believed.' Ordinarily he would simply sneak into his apartment while the boy slept. Such a thing was more difficult now. According to Hare and Cat Naruto had sent about sealing his apartment off from the outside world. He would have been impressed at the boy's creativity and skill in fūinjutsu if it didn't add to his concern that he was being influenced by the Kyūbi or somebody else. 'None of the reports at any point during his observation suggested he was skilled in anything let alone one of the most obscure and difficult of the shinobi arts.' The seals wouldn't keep him or Jiraiya out, but no doubt Naruto would know they were in his apartment for some reason. Hiruzen was no longer sure just how much Naruto knew and didn't know. All he could do now was wait for Jiraiya to show up to assuage his fear that Kyūbi was influencing Naruto.

Hiruzen turned around as his next appointments walked into the room. Each carrying the first of potentially many books in their arms. "Ah welcome gentlemen please come, sit." This meeting was simple. To determine which of the four publishing companies in the village would be responsible for the new books the Academy would eventually be purchasing. Rather than wait until a new curriculum was devised to scout the talent, he decided to test them now. He had given each of them an old textbook that was used by first year students back before the war. Told them to update the information and bring him a sample.

It was simple enough in its requirements and vague enough in specification to allow them to impress him if they took the initiative. Books were expensive and said expenses had to be justified. The present books were beautiful if lacking in information, but the shinobi world wasn't a beautiful one. He preferred simplicity over extravagance. The first three failed to impress him to any great degree. They were adequate in that they met his requirements, but they didn't go as far as he would have liked. Two of them still carried that 'Konoha is always right' sentiment and were eliminated immediately. The third was slightly better in that it at least considered the position of other countries but still ultimately failed and only took their position as it conflicted with Konoha's.

The last book, however, interested him greatly. It was from the smallest and newest publishing company, and they likely believed they had been invited as courtesy rather than actual interest. Unlike the previous three it wasn't full of bright colorful pictures that jumped out of the page that

would no doubt capture the children's attention. It was simple and used black and white photographs that significantly brought the cost down. It also had the benefit of not glossing over the cruel reality of the shinobi world. It was violent and bloody, and this book seemed to capture that. As he questioned the publisher's representative he became more and more convinced that they would eventually receive the contract. When he asked why the book seemed to lack character he was told that it was to keep the cost of printing even a single book down, but any changes he thought necessary could be made. His other questions were answered just as prudently. It seems this publisher shared his mentality in that simplicity was often the best way to go. Having tentatively made his decision he dismissed each of the representatives and informed him he would be in contact soon.

The reason he did not announce a decision immediately was to ensure that they were reliable. Whichever text he went with would be used to train new shinobi. When the other villages catch wind that he's shaking things up they will endeavor to get their hands on a copy of the new text. It wouldn't do to have their new curriculum exposed and dissected so soon after it goes into practice. For now, he would wait. He'd be vindicated a few days later as his spies brought word that the Tsuchikage and Raikage had each gotten a hand on a copy of the book they believed he would use. It helped make his decision to cut one publisher completely from the list. A shame too. They had been using that particular publisher since the Nidaime Hokage founded the Academy.

After reviewing the rest of the information, he informed the small publisher that they would provide the new textbooks after the new curriculum had been confirmed and the book altered to match. He was even more convinced of his choice when they suggested adding a booklet meant for the parents of aspiring shinobi about shinobi life. During their own research they admitted that there were many aspects of shinobi training and life they didn't understand. One of the workers even had a child who would be entering the academy next term and it prompted him to make changes to help his child pursue his dream. Hiruzen saw the logic and asked them to devise a sample and if he approved they could go ahead and start printing it.

While the Hokage was enjoying the life of exciting meetings and riveting paperwork, Naruto was making his way to a secluded training ground on the edge of the village. Officially, the training grounds were meant for active duty shinobi. Unofficially nobody really stopped anybody from making use of the free space, so long as you cleared out if shinobi came to use it and steered clear of the ANBU training areas. Training ground 29. Rarely would shinobi venture all the way out here to make use of this particular field. That was part of why it was one of Naruto's favorite places to go in the village when he wanted to be alone.

Its relative isolation and lack of use had ensured that the foliage had begun to take over. Wild flowers dotted the landscape with small rockscapes poking up here and there. On the opposite side of the field the area began to become more forest like as it backed up against a cliff that hid a small waterfall. It was a sea of tranquility in the hustle and bustle of village life. Naruto usually comes to this training ground to relax and enjoy some peace and quiet, but not today. No, today Naruto was making use of the seclusion and the nearby forest for one purpose. To begin growing his own food. Training ground 29 provided convenient access to the forest just beyond the wall where he would start his own garden.

Even though he knew the Naras were going to be a larger part of his life it just wasn't in him to rely on other people to support himself. So, he planned to grow his own food, would probably build his own place to live too eventually. Not with his Mokuton though. He preferred to do things the old-fashioned way which meant lots of hard work. The house was down the line though, after he had finished fixing what needed to be fixed. 'I'll probably build it here. It's quiet and not too far from the village but neither is it too close to feel crowded.' He made his way deeper into the forest hoping to find a small clearing with which to sow his crop.

After traveling for fifteen minutes he found an ideal spot. It was a small clearing that could support a single person and had the added benefit of a small brook nearby for water. The one benefit of being sold rotten produce was that the seeds and spuds were often still good and suitable for planting. It was fortunate that Hi no Kuni was predominantly moderate in climate and temperature. Winters were mild so the threat of crops dying off was slim in the colder time of year. Even then he could subsist off hunting and limited foraging if necessary. Naruto always enjoyed gardening. It was calming and offered him time to reflect on the goings on of his life.

After preparing and planting his small garden he set about laying traps around the forest. He had never been more grateful for his training trip with Jiraiya than he was now. Life on the road was not one of comfort and plenty. Food was often whatever they could find and hunt if they weren't in town, and towns were few and far between for them. Most people were uncomfortable around shinobi for their extensive use of 'magic.' Learning how to hunt, forage, and cook became a necessity. 'No way Jiraiya was going to be caught doing anything of the sort.'

With his crops sown and traps laid Naruto made his way back to training ground 29 to enjoy some more of the peace and quiet. There was also the need to continue his physical training. His early morning start was interrupted today to tend to his food needs. It was a slippery slope into stagnation and regression and it was a slope he intended to avoid at all costs. Naruto really had to thank Gai-sensei for his advice. It was doing wonders for his body especially now that he was getting the proper nutrients he needed to grow. Already he was standing at 149 centimeters. Only slightly taller than he had been when he became a genin. Due in part to years of neglect and a heavy ramen-based diet Naruto was never very tall ending at a height of 170 centimeters by the time he was Hokage. His growth spurt hadn't occurred until his training trip with Jiraiya where he was forced to eat foods besides ramen. Naruto was looking forward to being taller and avoiding the constant taunting about his height.

He felt as presence appear near the edge of the training ground as he continued running through his taijutsu katas. "Hello Shino." Naruto hadn't seen the bug user in a few days hospital trip notwithstanding. He did notice one of Shino's kikaichū as it made itself comfortable on his clothes. While most found Shino placing an insect on them weird or gross, Naruto found it comforting. Shino liked to be aware of what was going on with his friends.

"Greetings Naruto-san." His hands were in his pockets as usual as he seemed to walk without ever changing his gait or posture. "My presence here is to extend an invitation from my parents to dine with us one evening. They are very interested in meeting one of my friends." Friends never came easy for an Aburame. They preferred quiet company and silent socialization. An odd mix for most people.

Naruto finished the last of his katas and ran through the whole sequence to satisfy himself. "Sure, Shino sounds like fun. Just me or Shikamaru as well?" They did have separate lives and it was pretty rare that he and Shikamaru ever actually spent time together. Work had always kept them both busy not leaving a lot of spare time for relationships.

"Just you for now." Shino sounded as sad as an Aburame possibly could. "Why you ask? It is because showing up with two new friends would seem peculiar. Though I am sure my parents are aware of my friendship with both you and Shikamaru it would be odd to have you both over together before having you over individually." It was another odd custom of his clan. In their own bid to acquaint themselves with people they preferred one on one socialization, or interrogation as it usually was.

"No problem Shino, how about tomorrow night around six?" The custom of being invited to visit the Aburame was unique. Where most other families specify a desired time, they simply invite you over and allow you to select an appropriate time that is convenient for you. Despite their aversion to social interaction the Aburame were quite accommodating when they sought to engage in socialization. Seeing Shino nod in acceptance Naruto asked, "Care for a taijutsu spar?"

Shino's response was to charge at Naruto with a series of punches and kicks that would have been uncharacteristic for the otherwise defensive fighter had it not been an obvious attempt to surprise Naruto before they began. Naruto had to smile at his friend, 'It's just like Shino to try and capitalize on any advantage.' He allowed Shino to lead and avoided most of his strikes before striking out with a leg sweep to push Shino out of his attack. After creating a lull, Naruto slid his right foot back intending to create a better opportunity to use Shino's momentum to his advantage and toss him back when he charged again. Being familiar with Naruto's preferred fighting style Shino decided not to start another direct confrontation opting to use his height to his advantage on launch a series of kicks at Naruto from a safer reach.

Neither shinobi was exceptionally skilled at taijutsu, despite the number of times Naruto elected to engage in close range combat he was perhaps slightly above average. The simple fact was that his jutsu repertoire had been so abysmal that taijutsu was his only real combat option for many years. His own style was a mismatch of various styles that he had observed and fought against. It was as elegant as it was chaotic. Despite the conflicting nature of its component parts it flowed together remarkably well and gave Naruto unpredictability and versatility.

Unbeknownst to Shino they had attracted an observer who was watching their spar with great interest. Maito Gai was intrigued by Naruto's style. He saw bits and pieces of his own style, the Gōken, then there was the Hyūga's Jūken, the Uchiha's interceptor, the Senju's forest style, Sarutobi's Monkey style, and what he guessed to be at least a dozen other styles that the renowned taijutsu master was only vaguely familiar with. Gai was impressed at the display and wondering when and where Naruto had incorporated the many styles into his own. Such things usually take years of practice that he simply couldn't have. Deciding he had observed enough of their youthful display he returned to stoking his own fiery flames of youth.

Ignoring their 'youthful' observer Naruto continued to focus on Shino trying to force the bug-user to admit defeat. Naruto usually won taijutsu spars for the only reason that it was near impossible to exhaust him and his opponent eventually lost the ability to continue. That's why he liked sparring with Shino and Shikamaru. They knew enough about him to maneuver him into tight spots and seemingly inescapable traps. The two of them challenged the blonde in way most other people didn't. In no way did Naruto think he was the best and would win every fight Naruto wasn't arrogant enough to believe that he could win every fight right now or even if he was at his old strength. Many shinobi failed to distinguish between confidence and arrogance as their skill and success grew. Then they died. The members of Akatsuki were perfect examples. All were undoubtedly powerful. More powerful than most shinobi ever even dreamt of being. Yet in the end they all died and did so sure of their own superiority.

Shino would eventually put Naruto into a position where if they had been trying to kill each other Shino could have easily snapped his neck. "Whelp. Guess you won Shino." Naruto rubbed his arms and neck. Shino never pulls his punches. Literally. He'll come at you with everything he has. Just another reason to enjoy their spars. "That was a lot of fun Shino!" Naruto was amused as he watched Shino shake his head contradicting his friend. He dusted himself off and plopped down on the ground to enjoy some more of the berries and nuts he foraged that morning. "So, why'd you really come out here Shino?" As much as he believed Shino's parents were curious that wouldn't prompt Shino's sudden decision to seek him out immediately.

"Shikamaru was worried about you. Nobody has seen you since you've left the hospital and it was near a week ago that we saw you the last time."

Naruto had to smile just thinking about Shikamaru. "He does that doesn't he?" It was a rhetorical question, but Shino nodded anyway. "Well you can tell him I'm fine. Plus, I ran into Shikaku-san earlier today and he invited me to stay over there for a while. Not planning on springing anymore surprises on him for a while." All Naruto wanted to do was keep getting ready for being a shinobi again. Missions meant time outside the village relatively unobserved which translated into the ability to act. "Just training, enjoying the company of you two, and taking advantage as much of the peace and quiet as I possibly can before things get loud and messy again." The future was not pretty, and it would take a lot of blood, sweat, and more blood to clean it up. "Feel like some lunch?"

Shino reached out his hand to help Naruto up. "The Akimichi Yakiniku restaurant? I hear they have a new selection available." It was a little-known fact that the kikaichū were ravenous carnivores in addition to subsisting off chakra.

"Thanks Shino. Barbeque sounds good." Naruto always had room for food. A combination of being a growing child, a jinchūriki, never having enough food, and never being sure when his next meal would be.

Naruto settled into a comfortable routine. Shadow clones would go garden and hunt for his food, he and Shikamaru would run through Gai's training for them each morning, meet up with Shino at the Academy, 'focus' intently on the new remedial classes and topics the instructors introduced, and spend time after class training together. Before long they were entering their last year at the Academy. The extra classes were still exceptionally boring for Naruto, Shino, and Shikamaru but on the bright side things were moving in an appropriate direction.

Upon their return to the Academy after the last time Naruto ended up in the hospital, Iruka was surprised at the dramatic shift in his behavior and performance. Before Naruto was unfocused and barely scraping by, but over the ensuing months his performance improved significantly. It'd never be enough to pull him out of the first four years of his education, but he would at least be closer to the middle of the pack. Iruka was ecstatic at the change in him but for Naruto it was just another reminder that people had little faith in him and overlooked the adversity he faced in life.

The biggest change for Naruto over the past couple months involved his extended stay at the Nara house. Yoshino seemed to relish treating Naruto just as she did Shikamaru much to her amusement and their remorse. Despite her nagging, Naruto was happy to be staying there. It was the only time he had ever felt like he had a mother. Plus, he got to spend a lot more time with Shikamaru, even if it was just being near to him. Naruto was still planning to get his own place after he becomes a genin but for now he enjoys living with the Naras. They in turn appreciated the extra produce and meat he brought in every now and then from his gardening and hunting escapades.

Yoshino and Shikamaru took him shopping for a new wardrobe to finally do away with the orange monstrosity he had been forced to wear for far too long. They took him to a shinobi supply store that their family frequented to shop. He settled for recreating his future look as best he could, meaning looking as nondescript as he could. Black sandals, black pants, a black long-sleeved undershirt, over which he wore a mesh armor shirt, and last was a grey sleeveless utility vest to wear over his shirts for convenient storage of supplementary equipment. He had a kunai and shuriken holster on each leg, and another utility pouch on his back along his waist. On the back of his vest he added a deep blue Uzumaki spiral. They bought clothes that he could grow into which necessitated the purchase of tape, so his baggy limbs wouldn't hinder him as he grew.

His association with the Nara's also made some of the village inhabitants less likely to confront him. Others continued to harass him at every

opportunity, but nobody had outright attacked him since a couple weeks after the last time he was in a hospital. Turns out the same theory that works with schoolyard bullies works with adults too. Give them a good beating and they run away. Which he'd done.

Naruto was walking through town heading toward where one of the merchant caravans had set up in town intent on selling some of the hides from the animals he had hunted in the forest and try to do a little shopping. People were still sneering at him as he made his way into the make-shift market. Once inside the sneers and looks of disgust dropped of significantly. It made Naruto feel normal to be able to walk around and have people try to peddle their goods and wares at him. He wasn't interested in what they were selling but it felt nice.

He spent the better part of the morning haggling over his many furs and pelts. The early ones weren't in the best of condition and it really diminished the value to the point they almost weren't worth anything. With the better-quality furs, he had though he'd be able to get at least something for them. He eventually reached a deal with the merchant from Tetsu no Kuni. 'So glad I took up hunting! Never would have had this much money before.' He counted his money and put it away in his wallet.

One of the villagers who had it out for Naruto had observed the transaction and decided that the demon didn't deserve the money. He started following Naruto as he made his way back toward the village. Naruto was well aware of the tail but wasn't too concerned. He couldn't feel a lot of chakra, so he knew he wasn't being followed by a shinobi. 'It's only been about three months since I got out of the hospital. Usually my stays give me a bit of a reprieve, but I guess not for him.'

He continued his usual path taking as many back alleys and side streets as he could. It wasn't an attempt to lose his new admirer it was just the safest way for him to travel without drawing unnecessary attention. Inevitably he was confronted by his follower as he came out of an empty alley. Satisfied that they were alone he ran to catch up to Naruto and forcibly turned him around after grabbing his shoulder. "Demon like you doesn't deserve to have any money." Naruto turned his face up to look in his eyes. The man seemed so sure of himself and held his hand out as if he expected Naruto to just capitulate to his silent demand. "Why don't you hand it over you little thief."

They were still in the midst of the market distract where Naruto's presence was barely tolerated. Naturally they had started to catch people's attention. Naruto shrugged the man's grip off his shoulder and took two steps back. "No. I hunted those animals. I caught and skinned them. The money I got for their hides belongs to me." Defiance was always a sure-fire way to make people angry and it certainly did here. Emboldened by the perceived support from the watching crowd he started reaching for where Naruto had put his wallet. As his hand was about to reach Naruto's wallet his arm was retched downward as Naruto's forehead moved to hit the man in the nose.

Naruto didn't think he had hit the man hard enough to break his nose, but it was enough to make him bleed. The man fell forward as he fell to his knees carried by the momentum of unexpectedly being drawn forward. He clutched his hands over his nose as blood began to flow out. The man grits out with as much hatred and vehemence as he could muster, "You little shit, look what you've done." He recovered enough to stand up with one hand still at his nose trying to stop the blood. "Now you've really done it you little monster."

Naruto wasn't intimidated in the slightest as the man took his other hand away and pulled out a knife from behind his back. Just from the stance he took Naruto could tell this man had never fought a day in his life. It was sloppy and unbalanced. Had he been taller he could have easily disarmed him, unfortunately he was still short. As soon as the man charged him with the knife Naruto side-stepped him and moved to trip him. A sloppy and unbalanced stance was easy to topple, and the man crashed to the ground as he dropped the knife for fear of stabbing himself. Naruto picked up the knife and threw it at the man's hand that he had used to catch himself. He was rewarded with a yelp of pain as the knife had struck the back of his hand. The man cradled his hand and turned to look at Naruto with a look of hatred and fear in his eyes. "You always were a little monster, and this proves it."

Naruto wasn't surprised at the lack of tact. It's not like the man was trying to rob him and yet now that he was injured it wasn't his fault. Naruto, having remained calm throughout the brief contact, merely looked at him and spoke as calmly as he could, "I am what all of you have helped turn me into. You seem to take such joy in making me miserable. In the past I had simply ignored everything, deciding it wasn't worth lowering myself to your level." He ignored the snort from the man and some of the crowd who clearly thought he was crazy for thinking himself better than them. "but now I'm done." He started walking toward the man who was still cradling his bleeding hand. "If you want to keep attacking me, fine. Don't expect me not to fight back anymore." He started leaking some of his killing intent and the man started backing hurriedly trying to crawl away from him. "I've learned a lot about how to hurt people over the years thanks to all of you." He kept walking toward the man who by now had backed himself up against a nearby wall. "Let me ask you this. If you truly think I'm a demon and a monster, why do you keep antagonizing me? Is it really wise causing trouble for a demon?" He stopped as he stood before the man at the edge of his feet as the man started to panic that nobody was going to help get the demon away from him. Naruto copied the face Yamato often used to intimidate him into following orders, "Leave. Me. Alone." He turned and continued walking away from the market.

Naruto frowned as he remembered that day. It had prompted another unsolicited meeting with the Hokage.

Naruto was in his apartment cleaning out his closet as he was preparing to burn his old wardrobe when there was a knock at his door. Only one person ever bothered to knock. He threw one of the horrendous orange jumpsuits into the shockingly large pile as he made his way to open the door. Throwing it open he gave a slight bow to the old man behind it, "Hokage-sama." He stepped aside to allow him into his apartment, "What can I do for you today?"

Hiruzen took note of Naruto's new appearance. He had been told by Cat that Naruto had completely changed his wardrobe and no longer wore the bright orange monstrosity. But he had expected there to be some character left in his manner of dress. Now Naruto looked very unassuming and would easily be lost in a crowd if not for his whiskers and bright blonde hair. "Thank you Naruto-kun." He stepped past the blonde child and noticed the pile of orange through the bedroom door confirming that he was doing away with his old clothes. "I hear you ran into some trouble at the marketplace earlier today."

Mentally, Naruto had to sigh, 'Of course. The second I start defending myself he has all the time in the world to check up on me.' He moved to sit at the table after the Hokage had declined the offer of tea, not that Naruto had any. "Yes. Someone tried to rob me and drew a knife on me. I don't think they'll try it again though." His tone was even and calm and devoid of any remorse for his actions. There wasn't anything for him to feel remorse for. As far as he was concerned it was the other man's fault for trying to take his money and pulling the knife. "I told you I would defend myself if I was attacked again."

"Naruto-kun," The Hokage's tone was soft and comforting even as he was preparing to reprimand him for stabbing the man's hand as he moved to sit across from him at the table. "you cannot go around stabbing people in the marketplace. I am concerned that you are beginning to walk down the wrong path." He ignored the look of annoyance on Naruto's face as he continued his lecture, "As a shinobi of the leaf you will be expected to protect the citizens not injure them. I would have hoped the Academy had taught you this."

It was hard for Naruto not to be angry and sarcastic in his response, "My mistake Hokage-sama, next time I will allow somebody to take my money and stab me. I can absolutely see how that is the appropriate response to being attacked." He stood up and started moving toward the door, "Thank you for this lesson. I shall take it to heart. I only hope that when I'm a shinobi I don't hesitate to protect my comrades because they decided to resist somebody attacking them. I wasn't aware that defending yourself was a mistake."

Hiruzen sighed as he watched Naruto move across the room, "I'm not asking you to let your comrades be injured Naruto. I'm only asking that you not injure the citizens of this village."

Naruto reached the door and opened it, "Rest assured Hokage-sama I shall continue to allow this village to attack and berate me to make themselves feel better for whatever perceived slight I've done them." He turned to face the Hokage quietly indicating that he should leave, "If there's nothing else Hokage-sama I am quite busy today and you probably need to go inform the council their whipping boy is sufficiently cowed." He stood silently as Sarutobi sat assessing him. Deciding that the Hokage wasn't going to leave anytime soon Naruto moved to walk out the door. "Make yourself at home Hokage-sama. Please lock up when you decide to leave."

It never got old. Naruto was always the problem, never anybody else. From his perspective the Hokage was chastising him for being threatened and defending himself. The man who caused the whole thing seemingly forgotten as the source of the problem.

Naruto walked through the gates of the Academy and made his way to Iruka's classroom for what would be the last first day of the Academy. Over the past half year things had improved in how the instructors and other staff treated him. Namely that most of them had been replaced after the Hokage had implemented his new curriculum. Unfortunately for Naruto, Mizuki as an assistant instructor hadn't been replaced having been deemed too unimportant to be noticed. He had to commend Orochimaru for the placement of his agents. They were remarkably unnoticeable and ignored.

Naruto walked into Iruka's classroom and moved to the back of the room to his usual seat. He was early again today having decided to not wait around for Shikamaru, so he could think and clear his head. Naruto had decided he needed to focus more on his fuinjutsu if he was to have any hope of understanding the **Shiki Fūjin (Dead Demon Consuming Seal)** that kept his father's spirit and half of Kurama locked away in the Shinigami's stomach. It was a far cry from his usual focus area of space-time seals and even then, he had yet to crack his father's most famous technique. He could make a seal to bring him and his friends back in time and yet he couldn't figure out how the hell the **Hiraishin (Flying Thunder God)** worked. It was infuriating. He had managed to do the **Hiraishin** once, and promptly had to have Kurama generate new internal organs to replace the ones that were ripped from him during the teleport.

Iruka wasn't surprised to see Naruto arrive early anymore but was curious as to why he was oblivious to the world. He had tried to talk to Naruto, but he never noticed him. The notes he saw Naruto making confused him and if he didn't know that Naruto was unusually gifted in fuinjutsu he would think the blonde was just drawing and writing gibberish.

Mizuki on the other hand was convinced Naruto's work was nonsense. He had grown annoyed at Naruto who was no longer in danger of failing outright and was threatening his plan to get his hands on the Forbidden Scroll for Orochimaru. Naruto still couldn't do the **Bunshin no Jutsu (Clone Technique)** so he was confident that his plan would still work in the end. Naruto had been passing his written tests despite the genjutsu Mizuki kept layering on him, but Mizuki's plan was just to alter the grades at the end of the year. Iruka rarely bothered to do any grading himself so he'd be surprised but see and remember nothing is wrong.

There was nothing more he could gleam from his father's notes without more information, so he turned back to working on the **Hiraishin**. He was determined to recreate it and get it to work without killing him. Naruto was considering making a trip to the ruins of Uzushio to see if there was anything left that might help him in either endeavor. Like he always did he got so enamored with his work that he didn't notice the rest of the class come in and missed Iruka and Mizuki starting their lecture on more dangerous traps until an eraser found its way toward his head. He looked up startled to see the class full and staring at him. He blushed as he heard Shikamaru start to snicker at him and quickly cleaned up and put away his little project.

"So glad you could join us Naruto." Iruka's voice was more amused than annoyed. Naruto looked toward Iruka after he cleaned up and saw the amusement evident on his face, "Anything you'd care to share with the class?" He genuinely wanted to know what the blonde was working on but figure he'd decline and deflect like he had been wont to do as of late.

Naruto shook his head no, "No sensei. Sorry. It won't happen again." He turned to glare at Shikamaru who snickered louder now. Shikamaru only smirked at him before Iruka called everyone's attention back for their discussion on an explosive trap that could be prepared quickly and on the move for pursuing shinobi. Of all the classes he had to endure traps held Naruto's interest the most. It was so similar to pranking in both planning and execution it was crazy. Naruto easily dominated the alteration and use of traps in their discussions and almost always came up with something effective albeit unorthodox.

After morning classes Iruka and Mizuki took the class outside for more physical training. New standards had been set which at least forced people to push themselves harder. The fangirls still fangirled but they'd be able to better meet the physical demands of being a shinobi at any rate. Of course, all they really did was raise the amount of work they had to do in order to pass. They were all still obsessing over the 'last' Uchiha. In that regard the village hasn't changed at all. Naruto had been making attempts trying to divorce Sasuke from his pride but so far nothing was effective. Sasuke still called Naruto 'dobe' and treated him like he was beneath him, and Naruto has all but given up on changing him. The only option left was preventing his defection but that was more complicated.

Naruto and Shikamaru ended up as sparring partners and Naruto could cheer in happiness that made Shikamaru groan in anticipation of the spar that promised retribution. It was a game they regularly played to try and embarrass the other. Shikamaru usually won because Naruto got so focused on what he was doing at times, but Naruto got more than his fair share of victories as well. It wasn't long before Shikamaru was knocked onto his back as Naruto stood above him gloating, "How's the view from down there Shika?"

Shikamaru wasn't one to stay down even in defeat and there was always a way to embarrass Naruto. He made a show of examining Naruto, "Looks pretty good to me." Sure enough Naruto started to stutter and blush as he walked away from Shikamaru. Shikamaru stood up and moved to stand near Naruto chuckling at his discomfort as he threw an arm over his shoulder, "Oh Ruto, you still have much to learn in the art of embarrassment." He kept his voice down so as to not be overheard. "I've had a lifetime of training from kaa-san and Ino. You'll never be able to keep up with me." Naruto kept mumbling about troublesome women and pineapple heads much to Shikamaru's amusement.

The rest of the day was filled with boring lectures about jutsu theory, the importance of balance and control, basic chakra control exercises, and they were actually teaching genjutsu not just theory. Rather than spend weeks on a single topic they now spent a few hours and the students had to do a lot of their own leg work to learn something more. Shikaku had told them that's only going to affect their class and the one right after them

the newer classes were fortunate in that they had time to correct old mistakes.

They continued to let their time pass in the same manner as before until graduation.

Sarutobi Hiruzen stood panting heavily in a training field with some of his jōnin sprawled on the ground around him, "I greatly appreciate your time training with an old man like me, truly my skills have deteriorated with disuse." He had to smile at the incredulous looks from Kakashi, Asuma, Gai, and Tenzō. Nearing his 70s he was still able to run his jōnin ragged and they took offense that his skills were dulled, but even if they held him in such high regard he had to acknowledge that he had dulled over the years. He had stopped training long ago and didn't even work to maintain where he once was, and it only got worse as he reflected on his second tenure as Hokage. His statement was met with variations of acquiescence to their Kage's request and disbelief that his skills had lessened in anyway. Facts they were sure to point out to the elderly Kage.

He popped his shoulder back in place, "I don't remember it hurting this much. Truly I am old. Perhaps one of you youngsters will replace me soon." It was so much fun playing with his shinobi this way. The look of fear that crossed three of their faces was priceless. Sadly, he knew he could not name any of them as his successor. 'Minato, why did you have to go and sacrifice yourself? I was perfectly capable of performing the sealing.'

Gai had started shouting in his jubilant manner like always, "HOKAGE-SAMA TRULY YOUR YOUTHFUL FLAMES STILL BURN BRIGHT IN THE SPRINGTIME OF YOUTH!" The crashing waves offset by the calming sunset in this genjutsu always made the Hokage smile. Truly the most unique shinobi have the oddest quirks.

"Ah Gai-kun. I am much too old to enjoy my youth anymore." Most forgot that Gai was capable of adopting a serious expression and maintaining absolutely professionalism. "No. I'm afraid spring has come and gone Gai-kun. It's now autumn for me and sooner rather than later I will bask in the twilight of a life well spent." Gai could only nod in understanding at the Hokage's words. Not many could follow or understand Gai when he was raving about 'youth,' but he was only trying to get people to get the most enjoyment they could out of life before it ended.

He eyed each of his shinobi in great detail. As much as he wanted to pass the torch to one of them, he simply couldn't. With the exception of Gai none of them were skilled enough to take the hat from him as much as it pained him to admit. Kakashi and Tenzō hadn't progressed as much as they once did; they were still skilled, and he was fortunate to have such shinobi protecting the village but Kage material they were not. Technically speaking Tenzō wasn't supposed to exist. The same could be said of Asuma in terms of skill, there was also the fact that he simply wasn't as well known in the shinobi world. His time as a member of the Shugonin Jūnishi (Guardian Shinobi) while prestigious in the Land of Fire and a testament to his skill, outside he was unknown. None of the other nations would take Gai seriously enough if he were Hokage but there was no denying Gai had the skill and worth to lead the village. Every shinobi he thought of was much the same. Too flawed or unknown to be Hokage. 'It'll have to be Jiraiya at this point. He is the only option.' He wished one of his students had decided to remain in the village to make his life easier. Deciding he had spent enough time holding up his sparring partners, "You are all dismissed. I look forward to our future encounters in seeing if I have managed to improve." He cast one last look at Gai, "Never forget Gai that even after spring has come and gone there is always more one can learn. Youth gives way to wisdom." He smiled at his many children and began to walk back to his office with Tenzō in tow.

Administratively things had changed dramatically in the past year. With Danzō's help he had gone through every piece of paper he supposedly signed four months ago. There were some he vaguely remembered reading and approving, but others he was certain he would never have allowed to pass. Additional 'taxes' for merchants that never made its way to the village coffers, allowing businesses to deny services to people they found inappropriate or undesirable, and numerous other decrees he couldn't remember. As much as it pained him to admit without Danzō there was no way he could have wrested control back into his hands. Those councilors who were found to be manipulating circumstances for their 'friends' who made considerable investments into their businesses had found themselves faced with any number of charges from corruption to racketeering in some cases. That he allowed things to get to that point under his watch was shameful. 'At least now things are improving. The council has significantly less authority than it did before. Now I just need a successor.' His new relationship with Danzō was turning out to be a great boon to the village. After finding sufficient evidence that the council had fraudulently passed measures behind his back he managed to strip them of almost all their authority with the support of the Fire Daimyo.

Still the most troubling thing for Hiruzen was Naruto. The boy had seemingly lost all trust and faith in him and they no longer associated regularly. In fact, it almost seemed like Naruto was going out of his way to avoid him. Whenever Naruto was around him now he only ever behaved formally, gone were the days of pleasurable trips to enjoy ramen and pleasant conversation. His performance at the Academy showed remarkable improvement which he took as a sign that the changes he had implemented were effective. If the worst student starts showing such remarkable changes nobody could possibly complain. Hearing the reports on the boy didn't help him any. He greatly missed his grandson but was at a loss for what to do. The more he looked back at Naruto and his life the more of a failure he felt. So much had happened with so little support. He wanted Naruto back but was unsure how to go about it.

Months passed in relative peace for Naruto and the village. Thanks to his hunting and gardening Naruto had managed to save quite a bit of money from the stipend the Hokage had arranged for him. There were some things he couldn't avoid buying like dairy products and shinobi equipment but now that he wasn't trying to buy everything it was much easier to afford things. Especially now that the Hokage was monitoring business practices to ensure the village receives its tax revenue.

Naruto was sitting in his usual seat only now flanked by Shikamaru and Shino. They had started sitting together a few weeks back as graduation grew nearer. It was no longer necessary to hide all of their activities. He looked around the room at what remained of his class. They had started with around 40 students but after the Hokage made changes the number of students had dropped to half that. Naruto looked up as Iruka entered the room and addressed the class, "As you are aware at the end of this week you will all take the graduation exam. Accordingly, we will begin reviewing material you can expect to be on the test." Compared to the previous graduation test it was going to be quite comprehensive. History, physics, chakra theory, traps, basic first aid, jutsu theory, decryption, encryption, and strategic and tactical thinking would all be part of the written exam. Trap making, kunai and shuriken throwing, taijutsu, fitness, and ninjutsu would make up the rest of the exam. More weight was being assigned to the practical side of the exam rather than the written portion now. It was decided that theory is all well and good but ultimately useless in the field if you were incapable of putting theory into practice.

Naruto wasn't overly concerned. The only concern would be the **Bunshin**. It depends entirely on how many clones they will require him to make and if he could make something besides an illusory clone all the better. He turned to look at each of his friends. Shikamaru was of course sleeping, or pretending to, it had gotten exceptionally more difficult to tell if the Nara was really asleep. Shino was the only one of the three listening intently to what Iruka was saying. Naruto looked around the room at the rest of his classmates. Sasuke still sat staring out the window all day. Sakura, Ino, and the remaining fangirls continued to send side glances at him before squealing or giggling. Kiba was playing with Akamaru and Naruto doubted he had heard anything Iruka had just said. Chōji was eating his favorite barbeque flavored chips as Iruka started droning on and on about practical

and theoretical physics. Hinata seemed even more withdrawn than before. Her behavior made Naruto feel regretful that he had hurt her, but he wasn't going to be everybody's lifeline again nor was he going to let her build up hope for something impossible. The remaining 11 members of the class were civilian kids that Naruto had never gotten to know and true to form they still acted as their parents did around him. He wondered if any of their teams would actually pass, but with a number of students not conducive to teams of three genin under a jōnin it was inevitable some 'failed' due to the lack of recruits. The day dragged on usually slow even for Iruka's standards, but they had finally been dismissed for the rest of the day. Tomorrow would be the last day of instruction to give students time to prepare on their own and the test would take place two days later.

Naruto, Shikamaru, and Shino were hanging around training ground 29 cloud watching. "I think after we graduate we should bring Shikaku in to help us Shika. Things will start to move quickly after our first Chūnin Exam." Orochimaru's invasion was the start of many things. The Sandaime would die, the Akatsuki would infiltrate to 'capture' him, Sasuke and Kakashi would be severely injured. This would force Tsunade to return to the village and be one of the driving forces as to why Sasuke left. "There's only so much we can do by ourselves. We'll need the help of somebody we can trust."

"We probably should have brought him in sooner, but it can't be helped now." In truth Shikamaru had wanted to bring his father in earlier. There was much the jōnin commander could have done to better prepare the village for what's coming.

"It is enough that we will tell him now Shikamaru-san. Why you ask? It would have been difficult for us to prove to him that we are who we say we are. Even with all of our knowledge of the future there are many secrets he is unaware of that we know about which makes convincing him more difficult." It was true. For all their knowledge from the future it was mostly relegated to the Fourth Shinobi War and its leading events. Most of which haven't happened yet. Danzō made certain that the village's secrets were well hidden from everybody. Even in death it was difficult to locate any information that Danzō never wanted to see the light of day. A man like Danzō couldn't just get rid of such valuable information though so it had to have been hidden somewhere.

"Well I can always just drop the fact that I know I'm a jinchūriki and the identity of my parents." All past interaction with Shikaku and Yoshino had made Naruto think they already thought he knew unlike the Hokage who seemed to want to live blissfully in ignorance. "I'm pretty sure they already suspect I do anyway though so maybe that won't work either. But we'll figure it out!" They spent the rest of the day with Naruto throwing senbon and kunai at them as they sparred up and down trees. 'Shikamaru and Shino have really gotten better at avoiding pointy objects.' Naruto still had a smile plastered on his face. He just loved hurling weapons at his friends.

The day of the exam arrived, and Naruto sat patiently waiting for Iruka and Mizuki to hand out the exam. Naruto was wondering what Mizuki was going to do to try and make him fail while also trying to figure out how to deal with him. The man was much smarter and shrewd than Naruto ever gave him credit for. It was damn near impossible to implicate him in anything and that was incredibly frustrating. 'I suppose the easiest thing to do would be fail.'

As soon as the test was handed out Naruto noticed a genjutsu over his test. Shaking his head, he dispelled the genjutsu and was surprised to see the exam he took at his first shot at making chūnin. He could answer the questions, but it'd be much more fun to mess with Mizuki. Naruto started drawing a small seal at the bottom of the paper. It would duplicate whatever was put on top of it. Once done he got Shikamaru's attention, who was 'sleeping,' and signed him asking to borrow his test. Looking confused he slid his test over and watched as Naruto put the test over one another and channeled chakra into the seal. There was a small flash of light that went unnoticed and he watched as Naruto smiled at his success before sliding his test back and offering him a grateful smile.

Now that he had the proper questions Naruto went about answering each question in as much detail as possible. They had been given 2 hours to complete the written exam. Naruto had finished about 50 minutes into the exam. 'Now I see why Shika slept through most of the tests until the last minute.' Taking a page from Shikamaru, Naruto set his head on the desk and tried to get some extra sleep.

Mizuki took Naruto sleeping as a sign that he couldn't answer the questions on the test. He had seen Naruto writing earlier and got annoyed that he had seen through yet another genjutsu but that was why he didn't give him the real test. Mizuki was content to let Naruto and Shikamaru sleep through the rest of the examination period, but Iruka eventually noticed them and sent two erasers flying toward their heads disturbing their sleep.

Naruto jolted upright at the impact of the eraser on his head looking for the threat. Seeing that he wasn't in danger he relaxed. He saw Shikamaru move to lift his head off his test paper which he had started drooling on. It was both amusing and cute as far as Naruto was concerned as he watched him wipe the drool off his face and complain about it being on the test as well. There was still half an hour left for people to finish and Naruto was exceedingly bored. Having nothing better to do he started removing any evidence of the seal he'd used to erase the bogus test and copy the actual one onto his paper. He doubted Mizuki would know what it did, but it was much more fun to make him think he screwed up. A mischievous made its way onto his face as he started thinking up more ways to mess with Mizuki. Thinking more on it though he started drawing another seal that would prevent the answers from being erased. 'Good luck failing me now Mizuki.'

At the end of the testing period Iruka took the class outside to begin the physical and practical exam. Mizuki was the one who would gather the written exam and grade them while Iruka dealt with the students outside. When he came to Naruto's paper he grew frustrated and subconsciously gripped his hand into a fist crumbling some of the tests he was holding. 'How did that demon brat get his hands on the actual test? I was certain I have him a fake!' He went through every other test to see if the demon had switched with somebody, but he couldn't find the test Naruto was supposed to have taken. 'It's fine. There's no way he would be able to pass the written exam anyway. He only paid attention in class and understood the material for the last two years.' Much to his shock and annoyance Naruto had answered every question correctly and got the highest possible score on the questions they put on the test to see if anybody can answer them. To make matters worse no matter how hard he tried he couldn't erase or change the answers. 'Damn it! At this rate the little monster will pass, and my entire plan will be ruined!'

While Mizuki was angrily grading the written tests, Iruka was running the potential genin through a series of physical exercises that served as a warm up for the coming taijutsu portion of the exam and would evaluate their physical fitness. The exam consisted of 3 sets of 25 each for pushups, sit ups, pull ups, squats, and followed by a 10-mile run around the length of the Academy's practice field. It was meant to push the students to the point of exhaustion before having them spar with a superior opponent. For shinobi who were expected to fight well beyond their own limits it was better to teach them this lesson in a controlled environment rather than in the field. The clan children were performing as he expected and though he could tell they were getting tired they continued to push through the exercises without complaint. The kids from civilian families were doing well but showed more obvious signs of fatigue. Not everyone managed to complete the exercises which would negatively impact their grade.

Iruka had the students line up in the order that they finished to give those that were winded as much time as possible to recover before their spars. The weapons test was broken into two stages. The first involved scoring as many points as possible against a stationary target, and the second stage against a moving target. "You must hit at least 12 bullseyes on the stationary target and 8 on the moving target." Given that Sasuke had to

prove he was superior to everyone he was up first as he had finished his run first. He stepped up kunai in hand and sent them flying one after another. All 10 hit their mark and split evenly between the head and chest. He moved onto shuriken and had all of them hit the chest. Next was the moving target. It moved erratically much like a shinobi would. Here Sasuke only managed to get 8 hits with his shuriken and 7 with his kunai. It was still an impressive achievement. "Well done Sasuke." Sasuke smirked at Iruka's praise while his fangirls squealed in excitement about their 'Sasuke-kun' being so awesome and hot. Naruto was up after Sasuke and his first set of weapons mimicked Sasuke's score. However, Naruto outperformed Sasuke on the second portion by getting 20 more perfect hits. "Excellent work Naruto, a perfect score." Shikamaru and Shino congratulated their blonde friend while Sasuke and his fan club looked on in disbelief and anger. The rest of the clan children performed in varying degrees of success slightly below Sasuke and most of the civilian kids did well enough to pass.

Mizuki had finished grading the written exams and joined Iruka outside to help administer the taijutsu portion of the physical exam. One by one the students would spar with either Iruka or Mizuki. The goal was to last for 5 minutes inside the ring or force the instructor out of the ring. Iruka and Mizuki would be fighting at a high-genin level of ability. Iruka doubted that many of his students would make it the whole five minutes or be able to force them out. The test was just meant to gauge their fighting capability. The fights went as one would expect them to. No amount of training could make up for years of experience even if the two chūnin fought at a lower level. Sasuke and Kiba had done better than most at keeping up with Iruka and Mizuki respectively and did eventually push them both out of the ring before the time was up.

Naruto, of course, ended up fighting with Mizuki. Naruto took his place in the center of the ring opposite Mizuki who was looking far too happy to not be inconspicuous. As soon as Iruka shouted 'Hajime,' Mizuki charged straight for Naruto much faster than he had with other students. Naruto soon found out he was going to hit harder too. Thankfully Naruto had gotten better at fighting in his smaller form and was better able to keep up with Mizuki's punches and kicks but not enough to avoid all the hits. Not wanting to just outright trounce the chūnin to avoid raising too many questions Naruto acted like Mizuki has managed to trip him with a leg sweep and fell backwards onto the ground and lay flat on his back. Mizuki let up for a moment enjoying the feeling of getting to push the demon around. In that moment Naruto decided the best way to end the fight was to take a page from some of the many women had used to get Jiraiya to leave. Not bothering to stand up Naruto sent his foot to connect with Mizuki's groin as hard as he could. His efforts were rewarded with a pained high pitch whine and a collective groan from the make students who immediately felt sympathy for Mizuki.

Naruto stood up and rubbed the back of his head, "Hehe. Sorry Mizuki-sensei. I just sort of reacted on instinct, you know?" Mizuki mustered enough willpower to not let his head though he had yet to get back up off the ground. Naruto turned to look at Iruka, "Does this mean I win sensei?" Iruka could only not dumbly as he sent the students inside where they'd administer the ninjutsu test.

Naruto made his way to the back row to get ready for the long wait. This part of the test was always administered in alphabetically order by surname. As a member of the Uzumaki clan he'd be going last. Iruka would walk in every now and then to call a student to follow him to an empty classroom where the exam would take place. Interestingly, but not surprising really, Sasuke was called first. 'Apparently 'u' is at the beginning of the alphabet or there is a convenient typo.' He watched each of his classmates walk out of the room. He waved to Shikamaru and Shino when it was their turn. There was no need to wish them luck. They're passing was always guaranteed regardless of academic performance.

As expected Naruto was the last to go. "Come along Naruto you're up." He smiled at Iruka and proceeded to follow him out the room. Arriving in the empty room he wasn't surprised to see Mizuki standing behind the only piece of furniture in the room as Iruka moved to stand next to him. Naruto walked to the middle of the room and waited for Iruka to start. "Alright Naruto, to start use the **Henge no Jutsu (Transformation Technique)** and transform into me." Naruto ran through the hand seals and focused his chakra to adopt Iruka's visage. One puff of smoke later and Iruka was staring across from himself. "Well done Naruto. Excellent attention to detail."

Not able to resist the opportunity, "Well of course he did well. I am such an amazing teacher after all." He smiled as he saw Iruka unconsciously nodding his head at the words before he realized what was happening and told Naruto to behave. Naruto just laughed and dispelled the Henge.

Iruka marked his grade, "Alright. Next use **Kawarimi (Substitution)** with one of the logs in the corner." He pulled out a blunted kunai and lazily threw it at Naruto who disappeared in a puff of smoke and reappeared near the pile of logs as the sound of metal striking wood before clattering to the ground reverberated across the room. "Good. Finally make three **Bunshin (Clone)**." Naruto hesitated for a moment trying to decide if he should fail intentionally or force Mizuki to alter his plan. To Mizuki and Iruka it looked like nerves. Making up his mind Naruto channeled his chakra and said calmly, "**Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu (Water Clone Technique)**."

Iruka and Mizuki were both surprised to see him create physical clones as opposed to the illusory clones. It was even more surprising to see him create three perfect replicas of himself out of water without a nearby water source. Iruka regained his composure, "Water clones Naruto?" "He must have a very powerful water affinity to be able to pull water from the moisture in the air." In truth Naruto hadn't pulled the water from the air he simply used significantly more chakra to force the jutsu to work.

Naruto replied excitedly, "You got it Iruka-sensei! See I found out that I just have too much chakra to ever be able to make less than 50 regular clones. My reserves are just too large and my control too sloppy." He noticed Iruka adopt a 'no duh' expression, 'No doubt he realized that with the Kyūbi sealed within me I'll always struggle with control.' "So, since I knew my control was too bad to do normal clones I started looking for other clones! Shikamaru's dad was kind enough to arrange for me to be taught the water clone and well here we are." He added a bright grin and his trademark head rub that was a telltale sign he was nervous, excited, or pretty much any other emotion. 'It's amazing how much use I get out of this one behavior.'

Iruka smiled at Naruto after getting over his obliviousness to Naruto's chakra situation, "Well Naruto I'm very happy to say you graduated!" He picked up one of the nearby hitai-ate from the desk and tossed it forward Naruto. He caught it and immediately put it around his forehead before giving Iruka a hug.

Iruka didn't notice the scowl that had spread across Mizuki's face, but Naruto did. Not giving Mizuki another thought he bowed to Iruka, "Thanks for all the help over the years sensei." He straightened up and started making his way out of the classroom. He waved goodbye, "See you 'round sensei!" As he made his way out the door. He just barely heard Iruka telling him to report here on Monday for team assignments.

Stepping outside he saw Shikamaru waiting off in the corner. He turned to walk toward him as some of the crowd saw him and noticed his headband. "Look! Can you believe they actually let *it* graduate?" "What is Hokage-sama thinking making *it* a ninja?" "I feel bad for whoever gets stuck with *it*. I mean would you want to be on a team with *that*?"

Naruto ignored all the insults and prejudice as he approached Shikamaru. "Hey Shika!" Shikamaru always made him smile no matter the situation, "Shino already head home?"

"Yeah said his dad wanted to talk to him about something as soon as he got his headband. I see you got one as well change of plans?" Shikamaru had eventually learned that Mizuki was the reason Naruto both failed and passed to try and steal the Forbidden Scroll.

"Yeah I figured it'd be more exciting and fun to see what he does now." Naruto figured that Mizuki would likely disguise himself as him and steal the scroll. He was too far set in his desire to both get the scroll and kill the demon. "If Yoshino-san knew what he was up to no doubt kicking him in the balls would no longer be effective."

That got Shikamaru laughing, "Assuming she doesn't just kill him outright yeah. Still though did you have to go for his nuts?" It was an unspoken agreement between men. Under no circumstances do you intentionally target a man's jewels.

Naruto had been studying the art of embarrassing Shikamaru from Yoshino. He laughed and said, "Yeah guy totally deserved it for what he was trying to do." He leaned in, so he could whisper in Shikamaru's ear, "But you don't have to worry Shika. I promise I'll never do anything to your balls that you don't want me to." He pulled away to admire his handiwork. He nodded in satisfaction as Shikamaru started going red in the face and a small trickle of blood was seen at his nose. "Why Shika, what in the world could you be thinking about right now?" He laughed again as Shikamaru ran into a woman while he was spacing out.

Being drawn from his thoughts, "I'm terribly sorry ma'am, excuse me." He executed a small bow before catching up to Naruto and glaring at him. "That wasn't funny Naruto, and I thought we had agreed not to do anything sexual until we were a bit older again." They may have been in their mid-twenties mentally, but it really didn't matter much when they looked at each other and saw their child forms.

"I'm not saying we should pick up where we left off in the future, although I am looking forward to it, I was just trying to embarrass you Shika. It totally worked by the way. That woman looked so angry I thought she was going to slap you and call you a pervert and the look on your face was priceless." It was thoroughly amusing for Naruto.

Shikamaru though wasn't amused. Well he was but he couldn't let Naruto know that. "You know what they say Ruto: 'Revenge is a dish best served cold.'" Naruto may be the prank king, but between the two of them he was the master of embarrassment. He gave Naruto a look that promised humiliating justice.

The spent the some of the walk home in silence. 'I can't believe I just thought of Shika's house as home.' The thought made him smile. 'I guess it is my home.' Yoshino certainly treated him like another son and Shikaku seemed to like having him around. 'Of course, that might just be because I don't mind helping Yoshino-san around the house.' That was definitely part of it he was sure. Still it was nice, he glanced at Shikamaru, "Let's hurry up Shika! I can't wait to get..." He paused for a second to work up the nerve to say it out loud, "Home."

He grabbed Shikamaru's hand and started dragging him along faster. He muttered, "Troublesome blonde." The small smile on his face belied his bored disinterested tone. 'They'll both be so happy he's finally thinking of their home as his home.'

Once in sight of the Nara compound Naruto released Shikamaru's hand and took off full speed toward his house. "Catch up when you can Shika!" He was out of sight before he could even register the words. Naruto made it to the front porch and quickly toed off his sandals before throwing the door open and stepping inside, "I'm...home!" The word still sounded strange to him. He had lived in many different places but none of them had ever felt like a home. They were always too empty and devoid of warmth. Not like here though. Here it always felt warm and inviting. 'It's no wonder Naras are so lazy when they're surrounded by this all the time.' He ran and plopped down on his futon in his room. Just basking in the happiness of the moment.

Eventually Shikamaru would make his way inside and to Naruto's room. "Wow man you blitzed right passed my mom without so much as a greeting when she noticed you running up here." He liked seeing the bright bubbly smile on Naruto's face. 'It's been so long since you were actually willing to let yourself be happy.'

Naruto rubbed the back of his head, "Sorry Shika. It's just your...our home," he caught himself before he made another mistake, "feels so beautiful!" He turned to look around the room where his many plants had slowly taken over after it became too troublesome to keep going back to his apartment to care for

Shikamaru was confused by his choice of words, "What do you mean it feels beautiful?" He knew how to feel chakra just like Naruto did but not to the same extent. So, he didn't understand how something felt beautiful.

"Well you know how everybody has their own unique chakra?" He waited until Shikamaru nodded. "Well families often have similar feeling chakra to one another and when they spend a lot of time in one place that feeling starts to permeate through the natural chakra. In effect your family had marked this area as yours so to speak." Shikamaru still looked confused but he nodded that he understood a little of what Naruto was saying. "To be blunt Shika. You Naras are a bunch of lazy bastards." He grinned at Shikamaru who wasn't going to object to the statement. "So now that your lazy family has spent so much time in one place the clan grounds just feel so welcoming and relaxing. It makes me feel happy and safe."

Naruto smiled at Shikamaru who smiled back. Shikamaru didn't understand what Naruto was saying but it made him happy, so he was happy. "Well we should go say hello to kaa-san properly before she decides to punish us or something." Naruto stopped bouncing a little bit as he agreed and wanted to avoid an angry Yoshino.

They both made their way down to Yoshino who was busy getting dinner prepped for this evening. "Ah so it was Naruto who came sprinting through my kitchen earlier. Good to know. I only caught sight of a black and yellow blur speeding up the stairs without so much as a how do you do."

Naruto laughed nervously. He could never tell if she was genuinely angry or just amused. It was very troublesome. "Sorry Yoshino-san I was just really excited to get here." He went back to bouncing around after she told him to help her prepare dinner.

Shikamaru was enjoying doing nothing as his mother and Naruto went about making dinner. Shikaku would walk in a little while later unnoticed by his wife who was busy chatting with Naruto as they were making the finishing touches on dinner. "What's gotten into Naruto? Don't think I've seen him this bouncy for a while."

Shikamaru didn't lift his head up to speak to his father, "The troublesome blonde finally figured out this is his home. Shogi?" Who knows how long dinner would be and shogi is a better way to pass the time.

"I see. Yoshi must be very happy. She always wanted more kids." Kids are just too much work to have more than one though. "Set up the board in

here and we'll play."

"Don't think he's told her yet. He just likes cooking and she ordered him to so he's even happier." Naruto was odd in his opinion but odd doesn't mean bad. Shikamaru went to get one of the many shogi boards his family owned and set it up. "He's troublesome a lot, but he's the right kind of troublesome." He saw his father nodding in agreement though Shikamaru was thinking in a different direction. "Knowing them dinner may not be ready for hours."

Shikaku snorted as he made his opening move, "Let your mother and Naruto have their fun, plus it keeps her from noticing us. You know what she'll do if she sees us playing shogi while she slaves over dinner." More than a few soup ladles, spatulas, spoons, knives, and rolling pins had been used to lecture and intimidate the Nara men to stop being lazy good-for-nothings.

"Yet you decided we should play in here where she could just turn around and see us." Sometimes he thought his father enjoyed when his mother would lecture him. It was a peculiar relationship that shouldn't work, yet it did. He had to wonder if his father was right that he'd understand when he was older. Reflecting on his relationship with Naruto, it was almost exclusive overtaken by the war and then with both their duties after Naruto became Hokage. They certainly had a physical relationship, but they didn't have anything like what his parents had. Not to say they didn't enjoy each other's company and relish whatever time they had for each other it was just different. Still Shikamaru couldn't refuse his blonde if he asked for something. Its why he ended up as the new Shizune after she finally decided to call it quits to better care for Tsunade-sama.

His mind wasn't on his game and it showed as his father slowly and methodically started pushing him into a corner. "Lack of focus is dangerous Shikamaru." To drive his point home, he had set things up to eliminate both his last remaining gold and silver generals in the next four moves. Shikamaru ended up forfeiting rather than delay the inevitable. He had been backed too deeply into a corner with no realistic way out in which he could win or even threaten his father's king.

As soon as dinner was ready Yoshino turned and saw the shogi board and began berating her husband and son for bringing their distraction into her kitchen much to Naruto's amusement and their suffering. It never gets old seeing Yoshino go off on her family. They all sat down as Naruto set food and tea on the table before joining them. Nobody made a big deal out of passing the graduation exam which was fine for Naruto and Shikamaru. They spent most of dinner in comfortable silence or making small talk about their day. Now that he wasn't bothered by prolonged silence Naruto valued and enjoyed the quiet moments as opposed to the oppressive silence of his previous life.

While the real Naruto had been enjoying an afternoon and evening of relaxation the Naruto clone following Mizuki had been enjoying Mizuki's plight at his precious plan falling apart. "Damn demon actually managing to pass. Everything is at risk now." Mizuki had been staking out the Hokage Tower trying to find a way past the guards and to the restricted library. To his great frustration and annoyance, the Hokage had increased the number of guards around crucial village structures which included the Tower. 'Damn it! It's okay the demon brat can get into anything. All I have to do is convince him to steal it.' He started smiling and laughing as he began to formulate a new plan. He jumped up to the roof and started heading toward the most important piece in his plan. Naruto's apartment. The first Naruto clone continued to follow not knowing exactly what Mizuki was playing at.

It had always been well known where Naruto's apartment was. It wasn't that far from the Academy. It was probably the only good thing about the building. Mizuki made his way up to the third floor where Naruto's apartment was. Nobody else lived in the building. Part of him wondered why he never made use of the other apartments. He made it to Naruto's door and saw the faded scrawling of 'demon' that had been written in red paint. He heard various stories around the village that it was impossible to break into the demon's apartment and that those who kept trying got hit by some nasty electricity. Mizuki decided to try knocking. He waited patiently until the door opened, "Hello Naruto." He put on his best take smile to make Naruto feel at ease. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about now that you're a ninja. May I come in?"

"Sure." Naruto opened the door wider and stepped aside to allow Mizuki entrance. "What did you want to talk about Mizuki-sensei?"

Mizuki walked in and sat at the table after Naruto featured toward it. "Well as you're aware the Hokage has made a lot of changes to the Academy program." Naruto nodded. "He also created a second test to be administered to a handful of students to evaluate their individual skills outside what the Academy teaches. With your pension for pranks and your ability to get in anywhere the Hokage would like to test you and the village's new security arrangements."

"Why me, and what would I have to do?" Naruto couldn't appear too eager to go along with Mizuki.

"No doubt you're aware that typically after graduation newly minted genin are assigned to a team of three under a jōnin-sensei. There are times when a jōnin takes an interest in budding shinobi. You have attracted the attention of a member of the Intelligence Division." Naruto looked suitably shocked at the news. "In order to make sure you're worth their time they made a request that your skills be tested. As for what you'd have to do: if you accept you are tasked with infiltrating the Hokage Tower, acquiring the Scroll of Sealing, and exfiltrating with the scroll. You will then rendezvous with me at a point outside the village. Depending on your performance you may or may not be taken as an apprentice." He paused to give Naruto time to digest the information. "So, what do you say Naruto?"

Naruto thought about it long and hard. 'On the one hand I know everything he said is complete bullshit. On the other it's a good opportunity to have a legitimate reason to reacquire the **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Shadow Clone Technique)** and to gain access to more advanced techniques. Perhaps the **Hiraishin (Flying Thunder God)** and **Shiki Fūjin (Dead Demon Consuming Seal)** are in there as well.' Deciding that it was too good an opportunity to really pass up, "I'll do it Mizuki-sensei." 'Why'd I not fail again?' He noticed Mizuki's smile that screamed ill intent rather than happiness. 'Oh yeah. THAT'S why.' Its always more fun to mess with an unware opponent.

Mizuki smiled, "Glad to hear it Naruto!" He pulled out a map of the village and the surrounding forest and laid it on the table. "Meet me here," he pointed to a position on the map, "after you have the Scroll." He saw Naruto nod and packed the map away. "Remember Naruto you aren't supposed to tell anyone about this, part of being a shinobi is keeping secrets." Hearing the blonde acknowledge his last statement he got up to make his exit, "I'll see you later tonight Naruto, good luck!" He opened and closed the door behind him. 'I'm so very excited to see you tonight demon. Finally, I'll be able to kill you and get my hands on the scroll for Orochimaru-sama.'

Inside the apartment the Naruto clone dispelled itself to let the original know what had transpired.

After dinner Naruto and Shikamaru were hanging out in his room talking about what Mizuki was doing. He had gotten the memories from his clone half way through dinner. "I originally thought Mizuki was clever, but he really isn't. Even though I failed he still needs me to steal the scroll for him." He was either a very poor plant or he's never actually met Orochimaru. The man wasn't one to suffer incompetence. "At least this way I can learn

more from the scroll."

Shikamaru was worried about Naruto. He knew he could handle himself, but things can easily go sideways fast. "Just be careful Ruto." Things hadn't really changed so it should end the same way it did last time. "Why'd you decide to graduate anyway instead of failing? Clearly the result is the same."

"I just couldn't resist the temptation to annoy Mizuki without him realizing I knew what he was up to." The memories from the clone that followed Mizuki had provided him with a plethora of happy memories at Mizuki's suffering. "It'll feel so much better when I reveal that I knew the whole time."

Naruto had a sadistic side that not many ever saw or knew about, but Shikamaru had seen it and had seen what Naruto could do if he's legitimately angry. It did not end well. "Promise you won't go too far?" He felt better seeing Naruto nod, but he was still worried. Mizuki wasn't ticked off more than usual the first time around. "Be safe." Naruto gave him a hug before making his way out of the house.

Sneaking into the Hokage Tower was a bit more challenging but shockingly shinobi still tended to not look up. There was only a single roaming patrol, the rest were stationed near points of ingress and focused around the Hokage's office. This would be the challenging part. As opposed to the chūnin responsible for the rest of the building, the ANBU took over here. The restricted archive was only accessible through the Hokage's office. So, Naruto wasn't even going to try to steal it. His plan was simple...ask for it. He silently opened the door and walked into the office. He turned to face the Hokage and bowed, "Hokage-sama." He moved to stand before the desk and waited to be acknowledged.

The elderly Kage was surprised by the late-night visit by his estranged grandson. "Naruto-kun what brings you here so late? Surely it's not to visit an old man like me." Although he hoped he had come just to visit.

"No. I'm here on business." Until he figured out the real reason Naruto was upset with him he would continue to behave professionally around the man. 'Hopefully it won't take much longer.'

"What business would bring you here so late at night?" He hoped his voice was free of any sadness at Naruto not being here to visit.

"I have been asked to steal the Scroll of Sealing by one of my instructors, Mizuki. For what purpose I don't know." Naruto now had his undivided attention.

"I see." A traitor in the Academy spelled trouble for him. "What were you planning on doing?" It was clear in his mind that Naruto had a plan or else he wouldn't have bothered coming here. There was no telling what Naruto was capable of. All the reports he had up until he ceased observation showed a very average shinobi. That would not be unusual if it wasn't the simple fact he was *too* average.

"I was planning to bring him the scroll and try to figure out what his endgame was."

Hiruzen considered the choices. Under no circumstances could Mizuki get his hands on the scroll but this is a perfect opportunity to learn more of Naruto's skills. It'd be far easier and safer just to send his ANBU after Mizuki, but his curiosity won out in the end. "Very well I shall authorize this mission. Uzumaki Naruto you will take the Forbidden Scroll to Mizuki as planned. You will then attempt to subdue him, preferably alive. A team of ANBU will follow you and intervene if necessary. Where are you supposed to meet him?" Naruto asked for a map and once available he pointed to a small clearing in the forest surrounding the village. "Right." The Hokage stood up from his desk and went to retrieve the required bait. He returned shortly thereafter and gave it to Naruto. "Best get to work Naruto-kun."

"Hai." A quick bow and he was on the way out. Before he left he stopped and turned around, "Hokage-sama. It would be helpful if you could alert the jōnin that the scroll has been stolen. To help sell the deception." He turned back around and walked out the door planning to leave the same way he entered. A three-person ANBU team started following him from a distance after he had left the tower. 'Let's see. There's Cat, Hare, and the ANBU who helped me. Looks like if shit hits the fan I'm not on my own.' He made a beeline for the rendezvous point.

Back in his office Hiruzen had pulled out his crystal ball to monitor the situation. He had sent one of the chūnin to issue a summons to deal with the scroll 'theft.' He focused on Naruto and saw him moving quickly toward where Mizuki would meet him. 'He's definitely faster than any genin fresh out of the Academy. In fact, he's moving almost as quickly as an experienced chūnin.' He was forced to stop watching for the moment as his jōnin had started to arrive. After explaining the situation, he frowned as many of his shinobi were calling for Naruto's death. He could do and say nothing as his jōnin panicked at the thought of what he could do with the scroll's contents.

As Naruto was running he made two **Mizu Bunshin (Water Clones)** one of which transformed into the scroll. The clones continued to the meeting point while Naruto flooded the area with his chakra to throw off the pursuit team temporarily. Once done he took out a blank scroll and opened the other. He began drawing a seal on the blank scroll to duplicate its contents much like he had done with his test. With that done he resealed the forbidden scroll and put the copy into a storage seal on his vest. He took off to catch back up and replace his clones and ceased hiding his presence.

He met up with his clones before entering the clearing. It was a relatively small open space with plenty of nearby cover for when a fight breaks out. Naruto created a wood clone and had it transform into the scroll and sealed the real one into his vest alongside the copy he made. 'Nothing to do now but wait.' He sat down with his back against a tree not seeing a point in not relaxing.

Naruto sensed Mizuki heading toward him. He kept acting relaxed and aloof but was fully alert. Mizuki dropped onto one of the branches above him. "Hey Naruto. I trust things went well?" He had a Fūma shuriken strapped to his back and was sneering at Naruto. Naruto stood up and nodded his head at Mizuki. "Well then, I guess you're outlived your usefulness to me." He grabbed the shuriken on his back and hurled it at Naruto.

Naruto formed the tori (bird) seal and started spewing molten rock from his mouth, '**Yōton: Yoryūheki* (Lava Style: Lava Wall)**.' The shuriken flew into the wall and the metal began to melt from the intense heat. Jumping into the air to get above the wall he blitzed through another series of hand seals before calling out, '**Yōton: Shakugaryūgan no Jutsu (Lava Style: Scorching Stream Rock Technique)**,' and channeling more chakra to his mouth as he shot molten balls of rock towards a gaping Mizuki.

The balls of flaming rock that were flying at him brought Mizuki back into the present. Unable to get out of the way of the numerous projectiles he cried out, '**Doton: Doryūheki (Earth Style: Mud Wall)**,' while slamming his hands on the ground. The earthen wall that rose in front of him wouldn't stop Naruto's attack, but it would give Mizuki the necessary time to get out of the way. He jumped across to another branch and turned to face Naruto, "Well this is certainly unexpected. Who would have thought you'd have an ability like this?" He sneered again, "Of course you are a monster, so this is to be expected. Have you ever wondered why everyone hates you? Why they try so hard to kill you?" Naruto stood impassively

listening to Mizuki go on his rant. "Allow me to enlighten you. Twelve years ago the Kyūbi appeared in the village and started destroying everything. The Yondaime was able to defeat the beast but he couldn't kill it." He was getting annoyed at Naruto's lack of response. "He sealed the Kyūbi into a baby turning the baby into the Kyūbi so that it could finally be killed. You were that baby, and now I'm going to kill you once and for all demon."

Naruto finally broke his silence, "You're done then?" He smiled at Mizuki. "I don't understand the obsession some people have with voicing their ambitions during a fight. In any case I am not the Kyūbi, I am a jinchūriki. Kyūbi was sealed within me but I did not become the fox. I am nothing more than a warden, my body the prison, and Kyūbi my prisoner." At least that's how it started, but fuzzibutt was still sleeping so no need to bring him up too much. "I really expected you to be smarter than this, but then you did need me to get the scroll for you because you knew you couldn't."

"You may have some unexpected skills, but you won't be able to beat me you little shit." Mizuki jumped down from his branch to slam his hands on the ground, "**Doton: Tobi Tsubute (Earth Style: Flying Stones)**," A wave of rock erupted into the air and started flying at Naruto. Naruto jumped back and moved behind the tree behind the one he previously stood on. The rock projectiles had started tearing through the tree slowly. Seeing his jutsu having little effect against where Naruto ran, Mizuki switched tactics. He pulled another Fūma shuriken from a storage scroll and ran after Naruto.

Naruto saw the blade of the shuriken before he saw Mizuki as the latter swung at him from around the side of the tree. He backflipped away with the scroll still on his back and pulled out a kunai as the point of the shuriken imbedded in the tree. Mizuki used his momentum to pull the shuriken free and made a beeline for Naruto again. Naruto blocked the shuriken with his kunai but Mizuki was still physically stronger than him and he'd lose in a battle of strength. He sent out a kick trying to hit Mizuki in the knee who used his own leg to knock Naruto off balance. It was enough to allow the shuriken to start sliding past his guard. Seeing no other option Naruto dropped himself to the ground and rolled as Mizuki moved to slam the shuriken into his chest. Naruto tossed the 'scroll' at Mizuki who didn't think before he grabbed it, too engrossed in completing half of his objectives. The scroll transformed back into Naruto and tried to restrain Mizuki as the real Naruto channeled chakra to his mouth once more, "**Yōton: Sekkaigō no Jutsu (Lava Style: Quicklime Congealing Technique)**." A globule of quicklime coated Mizuki and the Naruto clone. Immediately after Naruto shot water at the substance, "**Suiton: Mizurappa (Water Style: Water Trumpet)**." A stream of water collided with the quicklime and proceeded to harden it into a cement like substance. He dispelled his clone and stood before Mizuki.

"See I really thought you were smarter. Why on Earth would I surrender the scroll to you after you try to kill me? Your own greed and arrogance blinded you and made it that much easier to capture you. In any event my job is done." He waited until the ANBU appeared next to him and Mizuki. He unsealed the original scroll from his vest and handed it to Cat. "I trust you guys can handle a scroll and a block of cement?" Not waiting for an answer, he started walking away. "Good. Tell Hokage-sama he can debrief me in the morning. I'm tired." He turned back around to address the ANBU who had helped him who he saw now wore a bear mask. "Before I forget, thank you for what you did Bear. Not many would have." He jumped up into a branch intent to return home and get some sleep before a long conversation with the Hokage tomorrow.

The Hokage had watched the whole thing with his **Tōmegane no Jutsu (Crystal Ball Jutsu)**. Mizuki had always been an average chūnin with hardly any noteworthy skills of his own. Naruto however was an eye opener. 'To think you would possess a kekkai genkai Naruto-kun. Odd for as far as I know neither of your parents' families possessed such a skill.' He hadn't actually expected Naruto to be able to capture Mizuki on his own but was impressed with how effectively Naruto knew his own jutsu and how to augment their use to his needs. 'Still I feel like there's far more that you aren't showing Naruto.' He commended the blonde for avoiding a physical battle with a stronger opponent and instead engaging from distance with ninjutsu. The most startling revelation had been that Naruto is aware of his status for the life of him Hiruzen couldn't believe that the boy knew. 'I really should debrief you now Naruto.' He debated having one of his ANBU go and fetch Naruto after they took Mizuki to T&I and returned the scroll to him. 'I suppose there's no harm in doing it tomorrow.' The boy obviously hasn't reacted negatively to knowing so there is no cause for concern.

Naruto made it back home and snuck into Shikamaru's room where he found the pineapple head reading on his futon. He silently made his way over and sat next to him. "How'd it go Naruto?"

Shikamaru hadn't looked up from his reading which Naruto saw was about some of his family's shadow techniques and the theory behind them. "It went as expected. Mizuki ran his mouth again, tried to kill me, he failed, used some lava jutsu to shock and distract him before capturing him, and then I went home and here I am!" He laid back and allowed the soft and warm futon to surround him. "I also made a copy of the scroll for myself."

That got Shikamaru's attention. "Why?" It wasn't that he thought Naruto couldn't be trusted with it, but the information in the scroll was forbidden for a reason.

Naruto waved his hand dismissively. "I thought it might have some information on the **Hiraishin** and **Shiki Fūjin** plus I wanted a way to get my **Kage Bunshin** back. Plus, who knows what else is in there. Might be some of the Shodai's wood jutsu and I could certainly use more of those. Especially ones that suppress a bijū." He rolled onto his side to see Shikamaru better.

"I suppose some of its contents are your birthright anyway. Just be careful Naruto a lot of that stuff is going to be troublesome and you know it." The **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Shadow Clone Technique)** was already a dangerous ability for most people to learn and that was the first one.

"I will." He closed his eyes. "Now come sleep I don't feel like going to my room." He smiled as he felt Shikamaru put his scroll away before shutting off the small light he had been using to read. As soon as Shikamaru laid down Naruto snuggled into him and felt one of Shikamaru's arms wrap around his chest. "Much better this way. Night Shika." Shikamaru just grunted his agreement before laying a soft kiss on the back of his head out of habit more than anything else. He had missed sleeping next to Shikamaru. It always made him feel safe and kept the nightmares from the war and after away.

Morning came faster than he wanted. Being held by Shikamaru though he had no desire to move so he just laid there thinking about how much he should tell the Hokage this morning. 'No doubt he'll ask about my Yōton, how I know I'm a jinchūriki, and what else I'm hiding.' He wanted him back but only if the Hokage bothered to ask him directly and stopped trying to control and know everything about him. Lost in his own thoughts, his hand unconsciously intertwined itself with the arm Shikamaru had draped over him. 'Perhaps I can lead him toward figuring out why I'm distrustful of him so I can finally have my jiji back.' Deciding he had spent enough time thinking, "Are you done pretending to be asleep Shika?"

"Not really. You know how I am in the morning Ruto." He had never been a morning person despite always rising early.

Naruto rolled over to face Shikamaru. "I'm not making you get up." He could spend all day next to Shikamaru and would be happier for it but things had to get done unfortunately. "It's only a matter of time before I have to go talk to the Hokage so I don't plan on moving until then."

"So why do I have to be awake for you to stay in bed?" He started rolling over onto his back to get more comfortable.

Naruto trapped one of his arms and laid his head on Shikamaru's chest. "Because I...don't know?" He felt Shikamaru whack him on the back of his head. "I do prefer laying like this though." He could hear Shikamaru's heartbeat and the thumping rhythm was a comforting reminder that he was his. They stayed silent and Naruto eventually fell back asleep listening to the constant sound of Shikamaru's heart.

'Great he fell asleep on me. Now I can't move even if I wanted to. Might as well join him then.' Shikamaru closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

An hour later Yoshino opened the door to find an ANBU there summoning Naruto to the Hokage. She nodded and went upstairs to get her lazy boys out of bed who were usually awake by now. She opened the door to Shikamaru's room and was about to yell for them to get up until she saw them. Smiling at the sight of Naruto using her son as a pillow she ran to get her camera and took a few pictures. 'Oh this is going to be fun! I can't wait to get these developed.' She put the camera back before walking back in to wake Naruto up. Shaking the blonde, he sleepily opened his eyes. "The Hokage has summoned you."

Naruto started sitting up rubbing his eyes. "Kay." He shook Shikamaru. "Shika we fell asleep again I doubt Yoshino-san is going to let us sleep anymore." A loud snort at the mention of the woman's name confirmed it.

"Troublesome blonde. It was your fault. You fell asleep on me." Not that he was going to protest too loudly. He noticed his mom had that look on her face, "Ughh...You took a picture didn't you?"

Yoshino's grin got wider. "Of course not Shikamaru. I can't believe you think I'd do such a thing." It became almost feral. "I took several! I can't wait to get them developed and pass them around with all the other moms." At which her son groaned, and Naruto merely smiled. She wasn't really going to pass them around at all except maybe to some of the other Naras who shared her joy in causing trouble for their children. One would find its way up on the fridge though.

She left the room as Naruto got up to start getting dressed. "Come on Shika you might as well get up." He reached his hand out to the still lazing pineapple head to help him up. After hauling Shikamaru to his feet he moved over to the dresser to pull out some clothes for him and Shikamaru as he stretched out his kinks. He put a set the clothes on top of the dresser. "I wish we hadn't slept so much. I really want to grab a shower right now. Stupid old man hauling me out this early on a Sunday." He started changing out of the clothes he wore yesterday having not bothered to change after he got back. Once done he turned to face Shikamaru, "Don't be too lazy today Shika." He started walking out to meet with the waiting ANBU. "Hopefully this won't take too long." He doubted it would take very long at all but one never knew with the Hokage. He walked outside to see Bear waiting for him. "Bear-san! It's good to see you again." Bear nodded before placing his hand on Naruto's shoulder and used the **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** to transport them both outside the Hokage's office.

Bear ushered him into the office, bowed to the Hokage, and then disappeared in a smokeless **Shunshin**. Naruto bowed to the Hokage as well. "Hokage-sama."

"Ahh Naruto-kun. I trust you slept well?" Seeing Naruto nod he continued, "Good then I believe we have some things to discuss. First, how long have you known about the Kyūbi and who told you?"

"A couple years now and did you honestly expect the entire village capable of keeping it a secret? Plenty of people call me 'demon' or 'monster' so it really wasn't hard to connect the dots given my birthday and the giant seal on my stomach."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" Hiruzen asked.

"I could ask you the same thing." Naruto replied.

"I did it to try to protect you. I didn't think you would be able to handle it."

"Protecting me worked out well didn't it? As for me handling you're right I didn't handle it too well when I first found out. You still should have told me." Had the Hokage been the one to tell him Naruto might not have panicked the first time and run away leaving Iruka to the mercy of Mizuki. He might not have even been there in the first place.

"Are you angry that I hid this from you Naruto-kun?"

"No Hokage-sama. I've never been angry that you kept secrets from me." It was mostly true. The Hokage keeps secrets from everyone for different reasons. Even if Naruto didn't agree or like the Hokage's action regarding that secret he understood it. "I've only ever been angry that you lied about why you were lying. That you kept trying to keep me oblivious. You never once tried to explain why you couldn't tell me instead saying you had no idea. Me not knowing wasn't going to protect me as we've clearly seen." He wished he hadn't been an idiot when he first found out, but he had learned early on that being smart or good at anything was only going to make his life harder so he stopped trying and caring after the first week of school. "I'm not an idiot Hokage-sama and the fact you thought so was as insulting as it was hurtful. After all I seriously doubt an idiot would be capable of running circles around your ANBU and jōnin when they're still a child."

"I see." Hiruzen was starting to see where he went wrong. He had listened to all the reports from the Academy instructors that seemed to indicate Naruto was just awful at learning. Yet every time it mattered he pulled knowledge and ability out of nowhere. Only Umino Iruka was capable of finding and catching Naruto after one of his many pranks. Hardly indicative of somebody lacking any skill or capability. "Why then did you not showcase your ability in the Academy?"

"I tried to. The first day of class the teacher asked me to answer a question nobody else in the class was volunteering to answer, I assume in an attempt to embarrass me as it was a difficult question. Anyway, once I gave my answer I was slapped across the face and tossed out of class for being a disruption. Things went on like that until I stopped answering correctly or trying." Once he turned into an idiot he was left alone. "Then I'd only be thrown out when a subject deemed too important for someone worthless like me to know came up."

"You're saying all the instructors were out to sabotage your education?"

Naruto could only sigh, "You have too much faith in the people of this village sometimes. Since they're so willing to tie me to a tree and torture me do you think they'd stop there and not try to sabotage me at any turn? Even Iruka-sensei who at least stopped hating me didn't even bother to look past the idiot façade to consider my situation. As if I'd ever be able to squeeze three measly clones out of the **Bunshin** with Kyūbi sealed within

me. Not to mention members of the Uzumaki clan have always had abnormally large reserves, and yes I'm well aware of who my mother is so don't waste time asking. You or someone else did a remarkable job hiding the information but there was only one other Uzumaki in the village around the time I was born. Anyway, I was started on chakra control far too late in my development to ever have any kind of exceptional control over it." Another half-truth. Part of his difficulty came from Kurama subconsciously influencing and disrupting his chakra in his desire to be free from his prison.

Hiruzen had to acknowledge that fact. In his attempt to not influence the boy's decision to become a shinobi he has unintentionally stunted his growth. "It seems I owe you many apologies Naruto-kun. I did not want to force you into the life of a shinobi however that decision has negatively impacted your development. As for the other ways in which I failed you I can offer no other words than I truly did it in an attempt to protect you."

"I know. I just got tired of you lying about lying and I wish you had trusted me more." So much would have been better if he had trusted him more and talked with him instead of acting behind his back.

"Tabling that discussion for now. Your fight with Mizuki was very enlightening." The discovery of a new kekkai genkai in the village was always welcome even if its existence was one of mystery. "I must say I didn't think you'd ever awaken a kekkai genkai Naruto-kun."

"Neither did I." Both his Yōton and Mokuton had been surprises, but welcome ones. Naruto only wished he had ways to learn besides observation. "I would have told you but before recent changes...I didn't exactly trust you. I still don't honestly but we can work on it? It'd be easier if you weren't Hokage. The Hokage has to do things he doesn't like to do, things I know jiji wouldn't do."

"You have no idea how much I wish I wasn't Hokage anymore Naruto." How he longed to give up his hat. "I just want to enjoy my twilight years in quiet obscurity. But back to talking about you." He wanted to know more of Naruto's skills not dream of the future. "I wish to know more of your abilities Naruto. I'd rather not order you to reveal them, but I will if I must."

Naruto knew it would be better to come clean about some of his abilities but not all of them. The last thing he wanted was a Yamanaka walking through his mind. "Well obviously there's my Yōton which I'm sure you know is a combination of Doton and Katon. I'm also fairly decent at Suiton. I assume my water affinity is because I'm at least part Uzumaki. Without knowing more of my parentage, I cannot say where the Yōton comes from. I partially suspect Kyūbi enhances my Katon as well as it's a being made entirely of chakra and seems rather fiery tempered. I'm sure you noticed some of my fūinjutsu, but I have no idea how to gauge my level in that regard. There's so few experts alive in the field to know how I compare." It was a sad statement of truth. Fūinjutsu was perhaps the most versatile shinobi art but also the least used. "For the past year and a half, I've been following a training program made for me by Maito Gai and now that I am a genin I plan to explore resistance seals and have him reevaluate my program accordingly. Gai-sensei said we should avoid weights if we weren't going to specialize in taijutsu as it would hinder our growth." Naruto hoped this would be enough to keep the Hokage off his back for a little while until he was certain he could trust him to protect him from Danzō once he learns of everything. "I'd like to think I'm a solid chūnin in most of my skills but ninjutsu is where I plan to spend a lot of my training. With my exceptionally large reserves I could easily be a powerhouse there if I get the right guidance. I plan to learn some of all the shinobi arts though. I believe when you specialize you lose your competitive edge. Too many shinobi find their niche and stick with it and allow their other skills to take a back seat."

Hiruzen found himself agreeing with Naruto's self-assessment and if he really has been following one of Gai's training programs he might even be underselling himself. "Who is this 'we' you spoke of Naruto? I doubt very much that you were able to get here alone, no offense to you but by your own admission resources aren't exactly plentiful for you."

Naruto smiled warmly. "I thought that'd be obvious. Shikamaru and Shino obviously. They're the greatest friends I could ever hope for." They had done so much for him over time. Often just by being there. "They dragged me out of the darkness before it ate away at me. I don't think I'd be me anymore if not for either of them." He couldn't help the large smile that smothered his face. "I'd do anything for either of them, and they're ultimately the reason I'm still here."

Hiruzen's heart ached at the subtle implication there. He didn't know that Naruto was speaking figuratively and not literally. Naruto's whole reason for traveling back was primarily Shikamaru but he valued Shino just as much to do the same. Everything had been stolen from all of them and he'd do anything to give it back to them. "I am so relieved to hear you have such wonderful friends. True friends are difficult to come by. Treasure them for as long as you can. I'd take it then you'd like to be placed on a team with them?"

Naruto was floored by the question. It'd make things so much easier if they were all one team and able to do things together, but they just didn't see anyway that'd ever work. The way the teams were originally designed was solid. "I mean we'd always talked about it, but we never saw a way to make it work. The ones we were certain would pass just worked better when designed collectively as opposed to just us. A tracking team, a capture and interrogation team, and an assault/support team. Admittedly some of the teams had deficiencies but if you examined the class as a unit it would be well rounded."

Hiruzen was surprised at his insightfulness into how the teams would be structured. "How exactly do you think the teams have been structured Naruto? Are you ever certain they've been made yet?"

Naruto gave him a look practically asking if the Hokage was stupid. Seeing that the Hokage was actually interested in his answer he saw little choice, "Well first there's Ino-Shika-Chō that their parents no doubt requested be created again for the 16th iteration of the legendary team. Then you have a Hyūga, Inuzuka, and Aburame to form an ideal tracking team. Lastly there's myself and Sasuke to form a combat-oriented team with Haruno Sakura most likely being our support. Of all the civilian students she seemed the least useless." It wasn't saying much when Sakura first started she was downright awful and contributed nothing. "At least until you went and completely redid the entire program. Still we stand by our assessment of how we thought teams would be made skill wise." As much as they wanted to be a team it just wouldn't work for any of the other teams and they couldn't justify upsetting three teams in favor of one. "I'd really like to be with people I trust implicitly it just wouldn't work for the rest and we aren't selfish enough to do that. We're content to wait until we're chūnin before we get to work together regularly."

Hiruzen was impressed again. That was indeed how the teams were being built the only thing missing was the jōnin-sensei but he doubted Naruto had enough information on all the village's jōnin to accurately predict who would be placed with whom. "Very astute Naruto-kun. You've given me much to think about. Why don't you run along for now. I think I've taken enough of your time."

Naruto got up and bowed. "It's never too late to change you know...jiji." He tried not to look at the smile that spread across the Hokage's face. "You just have to figure out your own mistakes." He ran out as fast as he could before he betrayed himself to his emotions.

*** If anybody can check me on that it'd be greatly appreciated. I hardly speak Japanese.**

Like I said I'm not happy with this chapter though I am a bit happier with the ending, but I just wanted to get it out of the way. Life as a genin will be so much easier and more fun! Sorry to say this will probably be the only chapter for a little while real busy with school and work right now which is why this chapter is a little longer and took so long to get out. Thanks for reading. I promise the next one will be better than this.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

A/N: It's come up that shorter chapters might be better, and I agree. It was always my plan to have chapters be shorter. I really just wanted to get through the first couple chapters as quickly as possible and sometimes I just wasn't happy with how things were going so I just pushed through in the way I thought worked best. Moving forward chapters will most likely be shorter.

Also, been asked how much this is going to diverge from cannon and when. It was always planned that I'd start by following cannon pretty closely before diverging. It's not going to be like cannon, cannon, cannon, wtf is going on? But more cannon, still cannonish, slightly less cannon, wait where'd the cannon go? What that means exactly...well you'll just have to read won't you?

Will there be more Shino focused scenes/moments? YES!

When? That would be telling!

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

I still have no ownership of Naruto.

Chapter 5 – Are we starting yet?

Naruto was cloud watching with Shikamaru after he made his exit from the Hokage tower. "I just can't believe he let you go so easily Naruto. You reveal that you already knew two of the biggest secrets he's been keeping from you and play it off like it was nothing." It was pretty unbelievable that the Kami no Shinobi would be so easily placated with such flimsy excuses. 'Life is so much easier as a cloud. Just drifting along as the winds change. No worries, no wars, no nothing. Just existing. Why couldn't I have been a cloud?' Starting Monday, they'd all be genin again and that was the most troubling thing for Shikamaru. Life as a genin was so troublesome the first time around and now they have to do it again with knowledge of what's to come. He turned to look at Naruto and dropped a bombshell on the blonde, "You know we'll have to do D-ranks again right?" He couldn't resist watching the blonde's face sag with despair as the horror of that realization set in. 'D-ranks will do that to a man.'

Naruto was too engrossed in his own horrifying revelations to notice Shikamaru's smirk. 'D-ranks...D-ranks...D-ranks!' His own time as a genin had not been as pleasant as Shikamaru's or Shino's. The last thing a bunch of people who hire genin for D-ranks wants to see is the person they hate the most and despite the presence of the 'last' Uchiha many would go out of their way to be hostile to the blonde...after he finished his work of course. Mostly they were just trying to get out of having to pay him, but it still sucked. 'Plus...there's that damn cat!' Tora. 'How could anyone call me a demon when that thing runs around!' The bane of every genin's existence in Konoha. For now, he settled for glaring at Shikamaru after noticing the smirking and said, "I will get you for that Shika. Just you wait! In any event at least now we can kick our classmates in the ass to step up their training. They all have to be ready." It was inevitable that if they changed the things they wanted to there'd be no Fourth War. At least not in that form which means peace between the Five Great Nations will be a pipe dream still.

Shikamaru sighed at Naruto's threat of revenge, 'It's not like it's my fault we'll be doing D-ranks, troublesome blonde.' They had known since they came back that preventing the war altogether was the easiest solution. Truly only two people *needed* to die in order for it to stop. Obito and Zetsu. That's not to say more wouldn't need to die to ensure peace but those two definitely. Without them the Akatsuki is nothing more than another mercenary organization. As much as he didn't want to admit it he knew Naruto was right that they'd have to help motivate their classmates to not suck (die), and right now most of them still really sucked. The slightly improved focus on practical skills at least made the rest of their class more skilled than before...but it was a far cry from Kumo's standards. 'Say what you will about their militancy, but a single Kumo genin is worth far more than most Konoha genin.' No, they'd have to give their classmates a kick in the pants. "Why do you hate me so much Naruto?" Shikamaru moaned out in mock pain. "You keep making more work for me! Do you know how hard it's going to be to make *all* of them not suck?" He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple as he thought of it all. "The boys aren't really going to be an issue, but the girls...it's impossible. They're so assured of their own skill, except Hinata, and misguided in their view of the shinobi lifestyle, except Hinata and Ino." Thinking of the young Hyūga Shikamaru couldn't help but want to reprimand the blonde for handling the truth so poorly, "You really need to find a way to fix Hinata Naruto. I know you're not going to be everybody's emotional crutch anymore but she's even worse now than she was before and that's saying something!"

Naruto knew he was right. He hadn't handled Hinata with the care she needed because of her idiotic family. Still he wouldn't apologize for it. Hinata for all her talk of caring about Naruto had left him to suffer in his own loneliness for so long despite seeing how desperately he craved attention and companionship. Even silent companionship was preferable. "I know, and I already have a plan to do that." One fortunate thing about the situation is that he knew the real reason why Hinata made herself so weak. "The problem is that she's impossible to pin down now. Every time I even try to get close to her she runs away. So, unless you're willing to help me by restraining her with your shadow it's going to be a long time before she's forced to interact with me again." Naruto felt Shino approaching and sent a happy greeting to his friend, "Hey Shino! How are you? What brings you here?" Shikamaru sent a lazy wave to the bug user.

"I am fine Naruto-san. I trust you are well?" Naruto's happy grin was answer enough for Shino. "I am here to spend time with my friends. Why? Because soon we will no longer be able to do so as easily or frequently now that we are genin again." Shino ignored Naruto's comments at having to do D-rank missions again. They didn't bother him much and provided him an opportunity to potentially study more insects, something he would never scoff at. "There are also matters we must prepare for now."

"Shika and I were just talking about some of that." Naruto motioned for Shino to join them and laid back down next to Shikamaru. Shino opted to sit rather than stare up at the sky, he did not share Naruto's and Shikamaru's love of cloud watching. Now if there was a swarm of insects in the sky than it would be fascinating. "Long story short: our classmates suck and we need to fix that if they're to survive the coming days." Shino nodded in agreement at the assessment although he would never phrase it in such a manner. Naruto scratched at his face, "I suppose we also need to finally

bring Shika's dad into this. We might be able to kick our class into action, but the rest of the shinobi force needs the jōnin commander to ride them hard. Although I've noticed the Hokage training with Asuma, Gai, Kakashi, and Yamato. They are but a drop of water in the ocean of Konoha." Both his companions turned to look at him with confused looks at his metaphor. "What?" They continued to stare at him. "It's an apt metaphor!" More silence. "I hate you both so much!" Naruto pouted which amused his friends as they watched him try to pout while laying down. It simply doesn't work anyway you try it. "We can talk to Shika's dad Monday after you two finish your genin test. Kakashi won't give Team 7's until Tuesday."

Shino and Shikamaru nodded imperceptibly at his suggestion before Shikamaru spoke up intent to return to the last thing he and Naruto were talking about, "I'll help you with Hinata Naruto. So, will Shino I'm sure." A cursory look at the bug user resulted in agreement and question as to what. "Naruto here apparently has a plan to fix Hinata and needs help getting a moment with her."

Shino nodded in understanding. He had noticed how much more Hinata had withdrawn into herself after Naruto had revealed his preference. "I see, I would be more than willing to help. Why? It is because Hinata is an integral part of Team 8 and her confidence is greatly needed if we are to be effective." Plus, she was one of the few Shino had ever labeled as friend.

Naruto leapt up in excitement, "Sweet! After I take care of my registration form with the Hokage we can track down Hinata and fix this mess!" Not waiting for any response and ignoring the looks from both his friends that said there was much more to discuss he ran off. He yelled to the both of them, "We'll finish this later!" There was a very important reason Naruto had to take care of it today and now. Konohamaru. 'Just wait chibi Saru. We'll be training together again in no time.' For the longest time Konohamaru had been Naruto's closest friend/brother and it was a bond he was looking forward to re-forging into something stronger. Konohamaru was the reason Naruto understood what Iruka-sensei and Jiji were always saying and doing. Teaching the younger ones is very fulfilling.

Shikamaru and Shino were not amused, "Why does that troublesome blonde always do things like that?" It was a rhetorical question, but he knew Shino would answer. 'Sometimes its nice to hear an explanation for Naruto's behavior.'

"He wouldn't be Naruto if he didn't behave in this way. Why? It is because Naruto is always unpredictable," Shino drawled in a dry tone that screamed fondness. Shino's response was exactly what Shikamaru expected. An honest and simple statement that gave nothing away. "Just because he isn't here doesn't mean we cannot discuss things further Shikamaru-san." There were many things Shino wanted to happen in the future. The most notable being getting Torune back. He was glad to have the knowledge of how to breed Torune's insects from the future as it made the process so much easier now. He had a small hive of the rinkaichū that would prove most useful in the days to come. "For instance, there is still the matter of Danzō we must solve."

Danzō. Every time he heard the name trouble almost always seemed to follow. Danzō was far too dangerous a player to leave on the field, but he was crafty enough to be where he is, which made it difficult to eliminate him. "The world would have been better off without him if he had died during the Second Great War." It was a simple truth. Danzō's actions helped give rise to the present Akatsuki. The Uchiha clan was annihilated because of him. Tensions with Iwa and Kumo never died down because of his secret activities to keep the two destabilized. 'It wouldn't surprise me if Danzō was why the Senju and Uzumaki clans were near extinct as well.' Shikamaru had noticed how the fall of Uzushio happened not long after Naruto's mother arrived to become the next jinchūriki. 'It's not like Danzō wouldn't stab allies in the back.' Still with no proof it was speculation and there would never be proof. That's how Danzō operates. "It seems he has a new relationship with the Hokage that will make removing him from play much more difficult." Just another reason why they needed Shikaku. Shikamaru may be a genius but his father was still better. He sighed, "We'll bring it up with oyaji. No doubt he'll be eager to help after he learns more of what Danzō has been involved with."

Shino nodded. He would prefer more discussion on the matter but accepted he wouldn't get it now. With nothing left to do at the moment he decided to go train and leave Shikamaru to cloud watch. Shino sent one of his female kikaichū to rest on Shikamaru's shoulder. "I shall send an insect when Naruto decides to find Hinata." A lazy grunt of acknowledgement was the only response. "Enjoy the clouds Shikamaru-san. I wish to try new combinations of my earth jutsu with my insects, so I shall take my leave."

Naruto was making his way to the Hokage tower for the second time today and was positively giddy at the prospect of getting his student back. 'Though Ebisu will be a problem. No matter Konohamaru excelled at escaping him.' The thought made Naruto laugh given what he remembered of Konohamaru's stealth skills from the time. It was proof enough that standards for shinobi had dropped in he could escape a jōnin with those disguises. He slowed down from his run as he came in sight of the tower. Casually walking into the building he made his way to the administration office to pick up his registration form before walking up to the roof where the photographer preferred to take their profiles.

Naruto found himself at the end of the line which suited him fine. He had a plan for his photo this time although it was vastly different from the first one where he wanted to make a noticeable statement. This time it was going to be a subtle statement. He reached into his pouch to pull out something he had bought on the run to the tower. It was a black balaclava that covered everything but his eyes. Coupled with his clothing and Naruto wouldn't be identifiable when somebody got ahold of his file. He probably wouldn't wear it very much, but it was an important necessity that he picked up from Kakashi-sensei. 'Kami knows sensei should really get a full one to cover that easily identifiable hair.' But then it would interfere if he had to uncover his Sharingan. Still he could get *something* to cover it. 'Really it should be standard issue for all ANBU. Nothing such as identifying them aside from their masks.' He slipped the mask on as it came time for him to take his photo. Unlike last time the old man taking the picture didn't even bother to ask if he was sure he wants to look that way. Two quick flashes later and he was done.

Naruto was making his way to the Hokage's office. He didn't have to. The Hokage didn't personally handle the registration process but it was the easiest way to meet Konohamaru again, 'Plus I doubt he's going to care if I drop in for another visit.' He smiled fondly as he felt Konohamaru enter the building. Walking into the Hokage's office Naruto was suddenly faced with a dilemma. He had no real reason to be here and he wasn't as close to the Hokage as before. He was happy to see a handful of clones dealing with paperwork though. Leaving the Hokage to read his 'literature' in peace.

"Back again so soon Naruto-kun?" The Hokage's voice was soft and inviting but showed his surprise at seeing the boy again so soon. Not at all bothered by the unexpected visit.

Naruto stood quietly trying to think up a reason to visit quickly before his silence was noticed before an epiphany hit him. He rubbed the back of his head and laughed nervously, "Well you see Hokage-sama. I left out of here in such a rush this morning that I forgot to ask about this." Seeing the Hokage put down his Icha Icha book he continued on, "I meant to ask if there was anything my mother may have left me?" He doubted there was any kind of message from his parents. They weren't exactly planning on dying that day, but surely there was something of his mother's that he could have. Jutsu, money, pictures, anything to give him something to know her by.

The Hokage sat in silent contemplation for a long time. Reasoning with himself that since the boy already knows of his mother there's little point in

denying him anything that she might have left him. He figured that most things she left behind would be in her and Minato's house so there wasn't much he could give him. Minato and Kushina were both private people, despite her loud personality, and the house remained firmly locked until such time as Naruto ever went there. Still the Uzumaki clan had been quite wealthy and as the only surviving member Kushina was a very wealthy woman. 'I suppose it wouldn't hurt the boy to give him his family's money. There is one thing I can give him though.' Looking at Naruto who was now legitimately nervous asking for this brought a smile to his face as he spoke warmly to him, "I'm afraid Naruto-kun that whatever physical possessions your mother left behind are locked away in your parent's home. I cannot give you access to that just yet." He saw the look of defeat spread across Naruto's face, "It is not my decision to keep this from you Naruto and it never was. Your father left specific instructions that you were not to learn of him should the worst happen until you were a chūnin or sixteen whichever came first." It was the one thing Minato had planned ahead for although he had hoped Kushina would always be around to help Naruto. He watched Naruto nod in acceptance at this statement and stopped him as he began to move toward the door. "I can however give you access to your mother's money. She was quite wealthy and as her only child it is yours. I believe you already know the value of money and won't squander it." Not that he could or would. He smiled as Naruto nodded his head vigorously. Hiruzen opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out the only thing that Uzu had sent with Kushina. "There is also this," he set the small box on the edge of the desk closest to Naruto, "which was sent for your mother when she first came to the village. She decided she didn't want it after what happened to her home, but it is the only thing I can give to you for the moment my boy." He watched Naruto walk forward and gently open the box. Naruto stood there for a moment just looking at what was inside before he started to cry. "I wish I could do more for you Naruto. Truly I do."

Naruto didn't care that he was crying in front of the Hokage or the ANBU. This was something meant for his mother. Even if she didn't want it, it was hers and that was all that mattered to him. Finally, after so long he had something of hers that he would treasure forever. He wiped his tears and tried to sound calm, "That's okay Jiji. This is more than enough." He lovingly ran his fingers along the cold metal that was still resting in the box. Taking it out of the box he very carefully began to tie the fabric the metal was attached to around his neck. Once he was done he jumped over the desk and tackled the Hokage into a hug as he used to do. "Thank you Jiji!" He felt the Hokage squeeze tighter. Once the hug ended he moved to stand in front of the desk again.

Hiruzen had not felt so happy in a while. For so long Naruto had been distant because of his position as Hokage, but in this one moment he got to be his grandfather again and was relishing every minute of it. His eyes roamed over Naruto as he stood there happily crying. His vision came to rest over the item he had just given his grandson and it made him smile, "It looks good on you Naruto-kun. I have no doubt you'll do your family proud." He watched Naruto nod frantically as he continued to stare at the new hitai-ate that now adorned his grandson's neck. A few days after Kushina had arrived to be the next jinchūriki of the Kyūbi one of Uzu's hitai-ate made its way to his office so that she would have something to remember of home. Sadly, things changed and Kushina had not wanted a constant reminder of her loss, but now it was making her son exceptionally happy and that was enough for the elderly Hokage. "Although you might want to change the cloth Naruto-kun. The vibrant red hardly fits into your current look."

Naruto adopted a contemplative look unable to deny the truth in those words. The red drew attention to him and he was trying not to have so much attention on him. 'Although I did brand myself with a giant swirl on my back.' The more he thought about the more he accepted that he'd never be a completely subtle shinobi and his family had obviously chosen this color for a reason, so he'd accept that and leave it as is. "You're probably right jiji," he paused as he felt Konohamaru approaching, "but they chose that color for a reason so far be it from me to change things. Besides I can always just hide the fabric under my mask and leave the metal plate showing." Which he would. Nothing was going to cover his family's crest so long as he was wearing it. 'Man, who knew I'd be so much like Sasuke when it comes to broadcasting my heritage? That's depressing and horrifying at the same time.'

As he was thinking about that the door was suddenly flung open and a young voice started yelling, "I'VE GOT YOU NOW OLD MAN! YOUR MINE!" Naruto smiled as he saw his only student barge into the room and make to throw a shuriken at the Hokage who looked both amused and annoyed at the interruption. Just like last time Konohamaru tripped over his scarf and face planted. Naruto couldn't stop the snort of amusement that came out as the Hokage let out a cough to cover his own. Konohamaru sat up rubbing his face, "Ow." Seeing Naruto in the room he stood up and loudly started blaming him for his failure, "HEY! You tripped me didn't you!?"

'Ah Konohamaru. It's so good to see you again.' Internally Naruto was smiling but externally he was scowling. 'I have a part to play here after all.' He stood up and started walking toward Konohamaru, "I didn't do shit! You tripped over your own feet short stuff." Naruto made a point to lift Konohamaru by his long scarf. "If you can't stop yourself from tripping than you shouldn't wear such long clothing. It also makes a wondrous way to control you as you can see." Naruto was amused as he held Konohamaru in the air as the boy tried desperately to make Naruto drop him. Naruto noticed Ebisu entering the room and promptly ignored the man's hate filled glare.

Seeing his student held by the 'demon' made Ebisu scowl, "Release the Honorable Grandson at once!" Ebisu shook his head as Naruto expressed confusion at who and what an 'Honorable Grandson' was. "He is Sandaime-sama's grandson."

Sure, enough Konohamaru started smirking and yelling about how he wouldn't do anything know that he knew he was the Hokage's grandson. Naruto however was deciding how he wanted to handle this. He knew that deep down that Konohamaru hated being seen only as the Hokage's grandson yet was quick to relish in the knowledge that he was. 'What to do? What to do?' On the one hand he could do what he did last time and berate the boy for being reckless and show that his status does nothing other than make him a target, or he could be nice. 'Screw it the old way worked best!' He turned his look away from Ebisu to Konohamaru as he lowered him to the ground. The boy was smirking in victory which made Naruto smile. Naruto quickly bobbed Konohamaru on the head, not hard enough to seriously hurt him but enough to knock him to the ground. "I don't give a shit if he's his grandmother! Nobody speaks to me that way"

Ebisu looked indignant at the blatant display of disrespect. All the while Konohamaru was clutching his head, 'This guy's different.' He watched as the blonde bowed and waved good bye to his grandfather as Ebisu kept fussing over him. While Ebisu was busy lecturing Konohamaru on his behavior toward the Hokage the boy snuck out to follow the blonde.

Hiruzen watched as both of his grandsons left the room as Ebisu continued to lecture to no one. He returned to his Icha Icha after making a note to release the Uzumaki's wealth to Naruto. 'I wonder how long it takes until he realizes Konohamaru has gone.' Ebisu went on to lecture for a full fifteen minutes about how great a teacher he was and why the boy should listen to him before realizing he was gone.

Looking around frantically at having lost his student, again, Ebisu asked to nobody, "Where did the Honorable Grandson go?" After hearing that he had followed after Naruto Ebisu paled, "THAT'S EVEN WORSE!" He ran out of the room as the Hokage shook his head and sighed at his antics, as Ebisu was screaming "HONORABLE GRANDSON!" all the while.

Naruto was wandering around the village waiting for Konohamaru to start following him after he left the Hokage's office. It didn't take long for a

square box to begin following Naruto around. 'Ah Konohamaru. It's so adorable that you think you're doing so well! Then again, I wasn't particularly skilled at this time despite having been trained, although we can use that term loosely.' He started making his way toward one of the empty training grounds pretending to be oblivious of the box following him. Once he found an empty one he turned to where he knew Konohamaru would enter from and waited. As soon as he saw the 'rock' he called out to it, "You can come out now. I know you've been following me since I left the Hokage's office."

A cloud of smoke appeared where the box was as Konohamaru started talking, "I was right. You must be pretty good to see through my disguise like that!" Seeing nothing wrong with a square box with two eye holes on the front of it.

Naruto shook his head at his soon to be student, "So what do you want kid?"

"HEY! DON'T CALL ME KID!" An indignant pout and shout accompanying the shout.

"Well," Naruto laughed a bit, "you never told me your name, so what else am I supposed to call you?"

"Oh, umm," Konohamaru's face started turning red in embarrassment at that, "my name is Konohamaru!" He was shy at the beginning of the statement but exuded confidence when he said his name.

Interacting with him made Naruto happy. "Well it's nice to meet you Konohamaru. My name is Uzumaki Naruto. So, what do you want Konohamaru?"

"You are a shinobi, right?" Seeing Naruto nod and point at his leaf hitai-ate, Konohamaru instantly bounced back into what Naruto called 'brat' mode, "You're going to train me!"

Naruto snorted, "I am, am I? Why on earth would I waste my time with some kid when I have my own training and responsibilities to deal with?"

Not accustomed to not getting his own way Konohamaru was unsure of how to respond. He tried falling back on the fact that he was the Hokage's grandson. A point Naruto shrugged at. Then he tried bemoaning his sensei that wasn't teaching him anything. To which Naruto pointed out he was still young, and his sensei knew what was best. Naruto didn't actually think Ebisu was handling Konohamaru well, but he had to acknowledge that Ebisu was a skillful teacher when he acted on it. He turned despondent when it became apparent Naruto wasn't going to give in to him.

Naruto knew he took too much pleasure in what he was doing but he just couldn't help himself. "Why do you want me to train you anyway? I've only just graduated from the Academy myself."

"Because I need to defeat my grandfather, so I can become Hokage. That way people still stop calling me 'Honorable Grandson' and know my real name." Konohamaru was in full blown brat mode as he kept on talking, "All everybody sees when they look at me is the Hokage. That's why they all call me Honorable Grandson." He spat out his unofficial name. "I hate being called that. I want to be seen for me. Not my grandfather." He looked back up at Naruto with pleading eyes, "That's why you have to help me defeat him!"

Naruto walked toward him and promptly bopped him lightly on the head. "You're seeking strength for the wrong reason." He watched Konohamaru look at him clearly not understanding what he was saying. "A Kage, ne, a person that seeks strength for their own selfishness will never be strong. Do you know why your grandfather is as strong as he is?" Konohamaru shook his head no. "He's as strong as he is because he wants nothing more than to protect his family," he paused and smiled at Konohamaru, "do you know who the Hokage's family is?" Seeing Konohamaru nod he wanted to hear his opinion. "Who?"

"My uncle and me." The simple response made Naruto frown slightly. Konohamaru saw this and knew he had answered wrongly. But he didn't understand how. His uncle was the only other family his grandfather had left.

"You mean 'my uncle and I.'" He would make sure Konohamaru spoke properly. "You're partially right, but I asked who the Hokage's family was not your grandfather's." Seeing that Konohamaru still didn't understand, "The Hokage views everybody in this village as a member of their family, and that is why he works so hard to make sure his family is safe. For even a single loss is a wound to his heart that never heals. No matter how distant they may be or how little he knows of them, the Hokage loves them all dearly and would do anything to protect them." Naruto saw that he had Konohamaru's undivided attention. "Let this be your first lesson Little Monkey. Those that seek strength for their own selfish reasons are weak, it is only when you find something to love and cherish beyond reason that you will find the path to true strength." Seeing Konohamaru nod his head in understanding of his first lesson Naruto walked forward and ruffled his hair much to his own amusement and Konohamaru's disdain, "You're still too young to be Hokage Little Monkey," he ignored Konohamaru's cry that he wasn't little, "but one day you may be strong enough to be Hokage. The path to Hokage isn't easy and there are no shortcuts. It's a long and painful path that requires hard work and a determination to never give up in the face of adversity. Are these things you think you can devote yourself to Little Monkey?" Naruto smiled as Konohamaru nodded his head vigorously. "Great! Now then let's see what you've got Konohamaru!"

Naruto spent the next few hours working with Konohamaru on his shurikenjutsu and introduced him to basic chakra control exercises. Unlike with his teachers who had always left him alone to figure out what he was doing wrong Naruto pointed out Konohamaru's flaws while also commending him for the things he did well or right. Naruto knew that Ebisu had been watching them for awhile and was grateful he had not dropped down to drag Konohamaru away. 'Hopefully he sees that if he treats Konohamaru as a person and not a title he can get the most out of the boy.' Deciding that he had spent enough time with his again new student Naruto called out for Konohamaru to stop, "That's enough for one day Little Monkey."

Konohamaru had grown used to Naruto's name for him rather quickly even if he'd never let Naruto know that, "How many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me that?! My name is Konohamaru." He pouted as Naruto laughed and ruffled his hair again.

"Oh, I'm sorry Konohamaru," nobody in the area believed for a second Naruto was sorry, "I forgot you don't like being called that. In any event I have some things I need to take care of. Why don't you go find Ebisu-sensei and see if he has anything else for you to learn?" He was quick to jump on Konohamaru's frown as he mentioned his wayward sensei's name. "Now, now, Little Monkey Ebisu-sensei is an excellent teacher. If you want him to see you as Konohamaru you have to show him that you're serious in your desire to become strong and be Hokage." Noticing that Konohamaru might not be willing to go to Ebisu, "At the very least keep up with your chakra control exercises. Once you can get the leaf to stick to each of your fingers and forehead simultaneously start trying to move them across your body. One can never have too much control over their chakra and the..." He would have continued had Konohamaru not interrupted him.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. The more I use my chakra the faster my reserves will grow hence why I need to constantly work on my control to better adapt to my increasing reserves." Naruto smiled proudly down at Konohamaru which made the younger boy's face redden.

Resting his hand on Konohamaru's head one more time, "I'm glad to see you listening Little Monkey." He continued to ignore Konohamaru's adorable fussing. 'I wonder if this is how Kaka-sensei felt about us?' As much as he wanted to spend more time with Konohamaru he had other things to take care of, "I really wish I could stay longer Konohamaru, but I have things I need to take care of. I'll try to drop in as much as I can but life as an active duty shinobi can be unpredictable." He took his hand off Konohamaru's head and started making his way toward where he figured Shino might be.

"That's okay, I understand." Konohamaru couldn't see Naruto smile at him. "I promise I'll work hard with what you've told me...and I'll try to listen to Ebisu-sensei more." Already Naruto's influence was improving him as he called Ebisu 'sensei' this time.

"Good." A lazy wave over his shoulder, "See you later Little Monkey," was the last thing Konohamaru heard from his new friend.

Hiruzen had spent the afternoon watching his two grandsons interact and was immensely happy at seeing them get along so well. 'Although I'm more impressed with Naruto's ability at teaching.' He worked hard to explain things in a way that Konohamaru could understand even if it required an over simplified example. Konohamaru had taken to Naruto's criticisms of his abilities well and worked diligently to fix them rather than lash out. Naruto training Konohamaru gave him far more insight into his abilities than any assessment or report has done so far. Too often the psychological aspect of shinobi life was ignored or overlooked and yet Naruto made sure to stress the importance of humility and emotional stability. *"An arrogant shinobi is a dead shinobi. There is always somebody stronger out there. A shinobi ruled solely by their emotions is destined to fall. Uncontrolled anger clouds judgement and makes you sloppy as does fear. Never allow your enemy to goad you with your own fears and anger, and they will try. To be a shinobi is to be certain of yourself."* A very true statement but it made the Hokage pause at the apparent wisdom of his 12-year-old grandson. 'Still this relationship will clearly be good for the both of them, and hopefully this will get Konohamaru to stop his surprise attacks.'

It was much later than Naruto anticipated. There were still a few hours until sunset. Naruto stretched out his senses trying to find Shino. He could find Hinata himself but Shino and Shikamaru were willing to help him, and Naruto was still a firm believer in teamwork. He found Shino at the library. Which was odd. The library of Konoha while expansive was limited in its selection meant for genin. The library the Aburame had would be vastly superior to anything he might find there. Seeing Shino walking out of the library Naruto jogged over to him, "Hey Shino! Surprised to see you here."

Shino had a single book under his arm as he greeted Naruto, "Hello Naruto-san. My father asked I retrieve a book he had leant to the staff here."

"Ah. Makes sense." Naruto fell into step next to Shino as they walked. "Do you need to return it now?" Seeing Shino nod his head 'no' Naruto continued on, "Well then let's get Shikamaru and find Hinata." Shino silently sent one of his insects to find Shikamaru, or rather the female Shino had left on Shikamaru. They made small talk as they wandered aimlessly waiting for Shikamaru to laze his way toward them.

It would be a full hour before Shikamaru wandered over to them. Seeing him offer a pronounced yawn with his lazy wave Naruto commented loudly, "In hind sight we really should have followed your kikaichū Shino. We should have known Shikamaru would be napping." Shino nodded in agreement while Shikamaru just ignored them. "Thanks for coming guys. Now we just have to find Hinata." It was easy enough to do she really only had three places she'd ever be in the village right now; her home, with Kurenai, or Training Ground 4. Sensing her at the training grounds Naruto started walking that way, "This way. She's going to run as soon as she sees me, or try to at least, so Shikamaru make sure you nab her in your shadow." He felt bad that they were essentially going to capture and restrain Hinata. She was far too kind and gentle right now to not react negatively, but it was the only way to start helping her.

"Kurenai-sensei will be able to help Hinata more. Why? It is because she has been caring taking care of Hinata for years now." It was well known that the young heiress was on the outs with her family. 'A pity really. Hinata is adored by the village.'

Shikamaru still didn't understand the Hyūga, 'Probably the way they like things.' To him the whole concept of main and branch families made little sense. Then there's the caged bird seal. The argument that it was there to protect the Byakugan was ludicrous. 'If it was truly to protect the clan everybody would have it.' Not to mention as far as he knew there was nothing stopping somebody from ripping the eyes out of a living Hyūga to accomplish the same thing. He gave up long ago trying to make sense of that clan. "Know what you're going to say?"

Naruto had for a long time known what he was going to say to her, "Yeah. Her entire being centers around her family. Her kindness is what made her 'weak.' At first, she was just acting but then she started to believe her family's nonsense. She just needs to be reminded of the truth." She also needed to learn that holding back was only going to kill her friends and family in the long run. The rest of their walk was passed in silence until they came upon Hinata practicing her Jūken strikes against a wooden post. She didn't have her Byakugan active and was too engrossed in her actions to notice them approaching from behind her. Naruto stopped a couple feet away from her, "Hello Hinata."

The girl in question let out a shriek of surprise and spun around to see three people standing behind her. Shikamaru was already working to trap Hinata in his shadow while she was distracted. After realization dawned on Hinata she tried to run away but found she couldn't. "N-n-naruto w-w-what's g-going on?" Hinata was already withdrawing as far into herself as possible. Something Shino and Naruto knew from her habitual behavior in these types of situations.

"Well you see Hinata. I wanted to apologize for how poorly I handled our last interaction. It wasn't my intention to hurt you. In truth I was trying to spare you from pain down the road, but I evidently handled it wrong." Social niceties had been lost on Naruto for a long time. Bluntness seemed to be the most efficient way to communicate as far as he was concerned. Things are so much easier when people don't dance around issues. "You no doubt somehow blamed yourself." The look on her face told him everything he needed to know. "That was really stupid of you Hinata. It's not something that can be influenced by others. There's absolutely nothing you could have done to change that." He could tell that it'd still take time for her to accept that, so he moved on, "I also wanted to know why you keep pretending that you're a weak little girl."

Hinata's was restricted by Shikamaru's shadow so her body couldn't respond to the opposite accusation of how she was. "...I d-d-don't k-k-know what you mean Naruto. I am weak." Her cousin said so. Her father said so. Her sister said so. Her entire family said so. It had to be true.

Naruto met Hinata's eyes with a soft gaze, "You know the one nice thing about being me Hinata? I observe people and I'm quite good at reading them. I had to be if I wanted to survive. I spent a lot of time watching you?" He waited while she stuttered out a quiet 'why'. "Simple. You were nice to me. Nobody was ever nice to me without an ulterior motive. Most people were only nice before they tried to hurt me." Hinata yelled out that she would never have hurt him without any stuttering. "I know that now. I didn't know that then. In any case it afforded me the opportunity to learn more about you. Do you know what I saw Hinata?" A simple 'no' was all he got. "I saw a girl with more strength and kindness than anybody was willing to acknowledge. I found it fascinating that when I first started observing you how quickly you were improving in your family's taijutsu style only to see your ability stagnate. I couldn't figure out why. Somebody doesn't just suddenly start doing as poorly as you did without warning." Hinata's eyes were wide in disbelief and shock. Whether it was because Naruto had been watching her while she watched him, or because Naruto might know

why she changed, nobody could say. "Then I noticed something else though. Right around the same time you began to do so poorly, your sister started her own training. Through her I learned about your family's...less than savory actions." Hinata's shock that an outsider knew of the caged bird seal was easy to read. "I still didn't understand so I had to learn more about your clan. It wasn't easy. Your clan is just as arrogant and prideful as the Uchiha and doesn't tolerate outsiders knowing about your traditions. I still learned the truth though. If you were the heiress of the Hyūga clan your sister would be branded and cast aside. Something you wouldn't let happen at any cost, would you?" Naruto motioned for Shikamaru to release her, knowing she wouldn't run. Not now. No now Naruto knew she'd desperately try to convince him that she was weak and that her sister was much better suited to being clan head than her.

"That's not true! I am weak. I'm horrible at the Jūken!" Hinata didn't notice that she wasn't stuttering and was stating her beliefs forcefully. A far cry from the shy meek girl she usually presented. "My sister is much better than me. She's smarter and far more talented than I could ever hope to be." Hinata had spent years building up an illusion around herself and was determined to not let it falter lest she hurt her sister. "She's learned the advanced forms of the Jūken far faster than I and is capable of challenging Neji!"

Naruto interrupted her, "Well then. How many times has your sister ever beaten you?" Hinata couldn't answer because she knew that Hanabi had yet to best her in a spar. "I commend you for playing an exceptional game Hinata, but you failed to anticipate that somebody would notice such a glaring flaw. The rest of your clan is blinded by your kindness. I am not." Of course, Hinata never considered that somebody outside the clan would be watching her, and Kurenai would never watch her while she was in the Hyūga compound. "Now however, you've become so convinced that you are weak that its going to get your family and friends killed." Hinata's eyes snapped up at him. Naruto felt horrible playing on her fears like he was but there was no other way. "You're 'incredibly talented' sister is going to get herself killed because you are unwilling to injure her at all. How do you expect her to improve if you hold back? Your clan has built up her strength and played it off your apparent weakness." There was one final thing Naruto could say to drive his point home. "Hanabi and Sasuke are almost exact duplicates of each other. Or at least they will be." Sasuke was the perfect example of what a shinobi and a person shouldn't be. It's not entirely his fault but regardless of what's happened he is responsible for his actions. Hinata disliked Sasuke precisely because he was arrogant, overconfident, and felt entitled because of his heritage. "She's already started walking down the same path as the rest of your family. You forget that the first time Neji beat her she used that seal against him. Of course, she'd be able to stand up to Neji."

"You're wrong! Hanabi is nothing like Sasuke." Hinata couldn't agree with anything Naruto said. Not because she thought he was wrong but because she didn't want him to be right. "It's not any of your business if I'm weak or not anyway! Neither do you have the right to interfere with my family."

"You are wrong Hinata-san, it is precisely because it is our business now that we are here. You are a Leaf shinobi, not a Hyūga shinobi. Your actions reflect upon all of us. The more you hold yourself back the greater harm you are doing your comrades. Why? Because sparring between shinobi is meant to be a way to improve yourself and that can only be accomplished if your flaws are identified." Pain was always offered such wonderful motivation to improve one's abilities. Getting hurt was one of the best ways to learn that your skills were deficient and where exactly your problem areas are.

At the end of the day it was on Hinata to change herself. They couldn't do it for her. "You are the only one who can change yourself Hinata. If you truly desire to better your clan than stop letting them walk all over you. Even if you aren't the greatest at the Jūken who cares? Your eyes enable you to see further than any other living being and yet your clan limits itself to only using taijutsu. It's illogical and stupid." It made Shikamaru's head hurt just thinking about all the clan's contradictions. "You have exceptional control and your ability to see into the human body would make you an excellent iryō-nin. Stop letting your clan dictate who you are and be your own person. If they have a problem with what you do, then just ignore them. You are your greatest asset, but if you let yourself you will also be your greatest enemy. Honestly letting others dictate your life is just too troublesome" The Hyūga never made any sense to Shikamaru. They could be so much more but somewhere along the way they got bogged down by tradition.

Naruto stepped closer to Hinata, "If you really want to be better than be better. How do you know you can't do anything if you aren't willing to try? There's a difference between hurting your friends and family and injuring them. You might injure them in a spar, but you aren't doing so maliciously. That is the difference between the two. I really hope you can draw your strength out again Hinata." Naruto started walking away, "After all you are the most skilled kunoichi of our class. It'd be embarrassing if Ino or Sakura were representing the up and coming female shinobi of this village wouldn't it?" Hinata had been the only girl who was never a fangirl. She would have been the best student at the Academy if she had had a better support structure. "Take care of yourself Hinata." Shikamaru and Shino followed after Naruto leaving Hinata alone with her thoughts.

"Think she'll listen Ruto?" Shikamaru wasn't convinced that Hinata would change anytime soon. She was too set in her submissive ways perpetuated by her family.

Naruto wasn't sure either. In many ways Hinata was worse off than Sasuke. Sasuke at least had the support of his family, 'Even if his father was an ass.' Hinata though was alone. Nobody in her family supported her and everybody looked down at her. "I don't know Shika, I really don't. Thankfully Shino will be there to watch over here and Kiba will definitely draw out her personality more." Assuming teams were still arranged the same way and why wouldn't they be? Naruto looked up at the sky and frowned, "Shika...we are so late."

Shikamaru faltered in his step and groaned, "Ugh. Kaa-chan is going to kill us" It was hard for either of the two boys to miss Shino's amusement at their predicament. "Laugh it up bug-boy. You're lucky that we can't pin this all on you," After all nobody would believe an Aburame lost track of time, "and that your mother isn't a slave driver." Shikamaru started moving faster, "Come on Ruto. Better to face the music sooner." Naruto fell into step after waving 'bye' to Shino who walked toward his own home. 'The later we are the more troublesome that woman will be.' They made their way home as quickly as they could, and things were as they feared. Yoshino was angry.

"Oh, hello there Shikamaru, Naruto. How nice of you two to join us." Shikaku was sitting at the table sufficiently terrified of his wife. Yoshino was casually slapping a soup ladle in the palm of her hand. "You two better have a good reason for making me wait around here after I spent so long making dinner." Shikaku had made dinner but he wisely decided to not bring that up lest her wrath fall on him...again. They may have been late but Shikaku was not, and that was worse. Yoshino and Shikaku took note of the new addition to Naruto's outfit.

Shikamaru reluctantly made his way to sit at the table grumbling about his troublesome mother. Naruto just smiled brightly at her and excitedly started talking about his day, "I'm really sorry Yoshino-san. It was mostly my fault. You see I made a new friend today and lost track of time hanging out with him! Then we had to try and help on of our other friends whose been having some trouble." The best way to get Yoshino off your back was to make it about their friends. She always wanted Shikamaru to be more social and this time they really were with friends, so it was perfect!

Yoshino cheerily turned and went back to the table, "Oh well that's wonderful news Naruto! I see you also have a new accessory. Come sit and you can tell us all about your new friend." Shikamaru relaxed at his mother's quick turn around something she couldn't ignore, "Stop slouching Shikamaru!" Naruto loved spending time with them at dinner. Seeing Shikamaru and Yoshino interact always made him happy. No matter how much Shikamaru or Shikaku moaned and complained about Yoshino they both secretly loved every minute of it. Everybody listened as Naruto spoke about how he got the second hitai-ate and also how he coincidentally met his new friend. Everybody was happy that Naruto finally had something to know his mother by. Yoshino listened to Naruto go on and on about this 'Little Monkey' of his until he finally told them that it was Konohamaru. It never ceased to amaze her at how quickly Naruto made friends and how much he truly cared about them. Once Naruto finished what Yoshino thought was gushing over his new friend she asked about their other friend, "So what about your other friend Naruto?"

Naruto looked less excited about talking about Hinata, but Yoshino was like a dog with a bone when it came to their friends. "Well you see. A while back we had a sort of falling out? Since then she's really withdrawn into herself more, and it sucks ya know? Cause she's really talented but she doesn't seem to see that."

'Alright! Girl troubles finally something worthy of my attention.' Shikamaru hardly ever spoke about himself and his relationships to the point she often wondered if he even spoke to people. Yoshino was giddy at the prospect of one of her sons starting to date, "What happened between the two of you?"

Naruto looked at Shikamaru asking for guidance, but Shikamaru just shrugged in his direction. "Well, I uh..." Naruto rubbed the back of his head. He knew Yoshino wouldn't care and had been supportive of him and Shikamaru in the future-past, but it still made him nervous. "I tend to be blunt and forward with things sometimes to the point it seems hurtful or insensitive." Naruto let out a sigh at having to talk about his own social failings. Yoshino was merely curious as to what Naruto could have said to her. "I knew she had a crush on me that had been building for years, but uh well I didn't feel the same way. Rather than lead her on or let it build more than it already had I told her the truth. She didn't take it too well and we haven't spoken until today." Yoshino looked ready to berate him for allowing things to fester for so long, but Naruto was quick to defend himself at her look, "It's not like I didn't try to talk to her again and explain, but she kept running away from me! That's why I needed Shikamaru's help. You know so he could keep her from running long enough for us to talk." It really sounded worse when he said it out loud, or so he thought at least.

Yoshino softened her features and voice. It was on her to act as Naruto's mother since nobody else would. "Well you could certainly use some help on social niceties Naruto, but that's something that comes with time." How could she possibly blame him for not knowing how to behave when nobody had raised him for most of his life? "We'll work on that later." She smiled at seeing him nod in agreement, but she was still curious, "So if you don't like her that way is there some other girl you like?"

Naruto blushed and cursed his once again hormonal body for betraying him, "Well...um. No. Not a girl." He whispered the last part so quietly that he was sure nobody had heard him. When he looked over at Shikamaru and saw expressive brown eyes meeting his own he felt so much better.

"Oh? Not a girl huh, does that mean there's a boy you like?" Yoshino had heard him. It didn't matter to her either way. Life was too short to be hung up on little things like that, more so for shinobi. Still she couldn't help but tease a little bit especially as it seemed so easy to fluster Naruto. "Who is this mystery man who's captured your sight? Do I know them?" Which really translated to, 'will I like them?' She smiled when Naruto started turning into a ripe tomato and tried to duck his head in embarrassment, "Now, now. None of that Naruto. I want to hear all about them."

"Well um, he's really nice and caring. He cares about family almost as much as I do if not more, it's hard to tell sometimes. He tends to be pretty guarded about showing how he feels." Naruto kept shooting Shikamaru glances seeing if he wanted him to stop. None ever came so he kept going. "He's got really deep brown eyes. Most of the time his eyes appear bored or irritated, and other times they're the most expressive part of him." He smirked before adding fuel to the fire, "He's also super lazy!" Yoshino snorted at that. "At least until those he cares about are threatened, then he's absolutely terrifying. I've only ever seen him angry once and it was frightening." Naruto had learned that day that you never ever want to get a Nara motivated to destroy you. Not stop, eliminate, or kill, but destroy. "Most of the time we just do nothing with each other, but it's really great. It's nice to just spend time with each other. His hair is deceptively soft, but he'll never admit that he takes such good care of it." Shikamaru pouted at hearing Naruto talk about his hair. "He also puts up with all my quirks. He jokingly complains about them all the time but very rarely is he actually bothered by them. It's very satisfying and fulfilling not having to be anything other than myself around him." Naruto kept blathering on about Shikamaru as Yoshino absorbed the information happily.

Shikaku had been silently observing the entire scene. He too was surprised to learn that Naruto wasn't interested in the opposite sex. His own thoughts were often conflicted on the matter at least when it came to shinobi. Shinobi had a duty to foster the next generation especially exceptionally gifted and skilled shinobi. Such things meant that men and women had to have relationships with one another. That definitely applied to someone like Naruto. Naruto's massive chakra would no doubt be passed on to his children which would be a tremendous asset. Then there's his heritage. As Minato's only child the world would expect the son of the Yondaime Hokage to have incredibly talented children. Plus, he was one of, if not, the very last Uzumaki, and now he had a bloodline. Still he noticed how Naruto and Shikamaru kept having silent conversations with each other as Yoshino was grilling Naruto about who he liked and how Naruto lit up more so than usual as he spoke about that person. 'Interesting.' He listened intently as Naruto described Shikamaru to the letter and in such a way that spoke of a very long relationship between the two. 'Very interesting Uzumaki Naruto you are quite the mystery, aren't you?' As far as he knew Shikamaru and Naruto had been friends for a few years, but the way Naruto spoke of Shikamaru said that it was even longer and a different type of relationship which wouldn't be possible for two twelve, going on thirteen, year-olds to have had to such an extent. Shikaku could tell his wife was thinking the same thing but she hadn't yet connected the person Naruto was describing to Shikamaru.

Once Naruto finished Yoshino turned her attention toward Shikamaru, "And what about you Shikamaru? Anybody you want to tell me about."

Shikamaru sighed, 'Why is everybody in my life so troublesome.' If he told her about Naruto then she'd probably immediately start planning dates, outings, get-togethers with other couples, and of course a wedding after she got over not having grandchildren. None of which Shikamaru really wanted to do. Not because he didn't enjoy time with Naruto, but all those things were too troublesome and not how he liked to show affection. Still if he didn't tell her she'd never leave him alone. Taking a breath, he decided to just get it over with, "I don't really want to, but I know you won't accept that."

"You always were a smart boy Shikamaru." Yoshino smirked in triumph. Naruto had a crush and apparently Shikamaru did as well. It was a wonderful night for her. "Spill it Shikamaru."

Another sigh, "They're probably the most troublesome person I know." Naruto dragged him into so many situations both good and bad. "It's hardly their fault trouble just follows them around and unfortunately I tend to follow them around as well so of course I get dragged into it. It's such a drag. Still it's worth it. They have this personality that just draws people to them, and so far, I've only seen one person who didn't end up being friends with them. They're a lot more guarded now but deep down they're just a big ball of energy and happiness that always puts others first, sometimes

at the expense of their own happiness." That was perhaps Naruto's most frustrating quality. He never felt that he deserved happiness, so he always sacrificed his own to make sure everybody else was happy. That's why he used to always make ridiculous promises. "They smile a lot and most people just accept that smile at face value, but if they don't have their eyes open as they do it then I know it's fake. Their smile always reaches their eyes when it's genuine and when it's not they hide it. When they do smile though you can always tell how immensely happy they are by looking at their eyes. They become the most vibrant and expressive blue that you'll ever see. Like a vast ocean that just draws and traps you in them." Shikamaru could watch Naruto smile all day and be content so long as his eyes reflected his happiness. "If he's angry though those same eyes become colder than ice." Shikamaru saw those eyes when Naruto knew he had to kill Sasuke. Eyes filled with a conflicting sense of emotion; anger, betrayal, hate, regret, failure. Shikamaru was hardly one to talk much but Naruto always had a way of making him do things he wouldn't ordinarily do.

Shikaku once more was surprised. He picked up on how Shikamaru always addressed the person he was talking about in the third person. It belied no indication of gender. Not to mention that Naruto kept looking at his son with such fondness and longing that it was impossible to ignore. 'So many things don't add up with either of you two or your other friend.' They had a relationship that much was obvious, but it went farther than he ever suspected. Then there was Naruto's sudden explosion of skill and capability. Shikaku wasn't buying for one second that the boy was hiding it for all those years. Then there was Shikamaru's friendship with Shino. Maybe Naruto is the bridge between them, but it was rare for an Aburame to socialize, and to socialize with somebody like Naruto? Who for so long had a reputation for being loud and boisterous. 'Granted the boy is much calmer and quieter now.' Still it's like Naruto became a different person overnight. 'It's been so long since I've had such an interesting puzzle that refused to be solved. I will figure all this out eventually boys.' Dinner ended and the two boys in question set about cleaning up while Yoshino sat happily dreaming of all the ways she had to embarrass them in front of their respective love interests. Once they were done Naruto gave Yoshino a hug while Shikamaru lazily waved good night as they retired to Shikamaru's room. "You do know they were speaking of each other, right?"

The look Yoshino sent his way told him everything he needed to know, "Of course I did. I didn't at first admittedly, but it was pretty obvious after thinking about it." She was both happy and sad. Happy that her son was happy but sad that she probably wouldn't get grandchildren. "I know what you're thinking right now too Shikaku. All I'll say is don't. Let them have their happiness at least for a while. It's not something that has to be decided now. Naruto needs something good in his life and if that's Shikamaru let it be." She knew this was one argument Shikaku wouldn't easily budge on but for now she could let them be.

"I don't plan on doing anything." There was still too much he didn't know about them and he wouldn't do anything until he did. "Still Shikamaru will have to find a girl to settle down with as sad as it is." Konoha was pretty open minded about most things and so long as you weren't a public figure or a well-known and respected shinobi you could do as you please. If you were any of those however politics got in the way. Shikaku agreed with Yoshino that life was far too short to care about things as trivial as who somebody wanted to spend their life with. As clan head though he was expected to father children, and as the heir Shikamaru would be expected to as well. 'It's a cruel world.' It may be cruel in the long run to allow them this, but he didn't want to be the one to crush either of them. 'Parenting is so damn troublesome.' For now, he'd let them enjoy life before the cruel realities of the world interfered.

A shorter chapter just because I felt like it. You know when you're writing, and you just go "Oh man that's a cool idea!" That pretty much sums up this chapter for me. None of it is really necessary for the story but it's fun ne? I think it's fun. I mean I could have spent an entire chapter on Konohamaru and Naruto. They're adorable! It's one of my favorite friendships that I wish had been explored more.

Next chapter will follow shortly so don't you worry. Like literally probably tomorrow. Isn't that weird? Don't expect such fast turn around most times though. I just had a lot of free time recently, so I've been on a writing binge!

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

A/N: See two chapters in two days! Don't get used to it. I seem noncommittal to long vs short chapters don't I? Being an author is hard. Why the hell do so many people do it? I suppose they're a lot better at it than me and don't have as much trouble.

SyusOnix: It's not a reupload. Whether or not its been done before I can't say there's a lot of fanfiction out there after all. I can only tell you I haven't intentionally copied anybody else. But neither am I unique in my vision of this story. We all draw inspiration from others and I am no exception, and there are many facets of this story that have been done by others I'm sure. Naru/Shika is a pretty common shipping, as is time travel, bloodlines, a darker past for Naruto, and a lot of other parts of this story. I am just offering my own take on a series I love but disagree with how some things went and writing a story I'd want to read.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Can you believe I still don't own any part of Naruto?

Chapter 6 – We're Genin...Again!

Monday arrived sooner than anybody expected. Naruto had spent most of Sunday studying the contents of the Forbidden Scroll and was happy to see that the **Hiraishin (Flying Thunder God)** was indeed contained within. Both versions of it. Finally, he began to see why his father's jutsu wouldn't work with him. It was a complex formula that was specially tailored to each individual. That's why the Nidaime's and his father's seals looked so different. They had to be. It also explained why Naruto managed to use his father's seal at all even if he would have died without Kurama to regenerate his organs. Since he shared half of his genes with his father he was able to force it to work, with great consequence. Still knowing was half the battle and now he had a place to start, but he was essentially starting from scratch.

With a new seal that needed designing and testing Naruto once again became oblivious to the world. Not even noticing that Shikamaru had to literally carry him to the Academy for team assignments much to his mother's amusement and everybody else's confusion. When he met up with Shino he had to explain that Naruto finally had a break through. Shino was both happy and exasperated. This meant Naruto would probably need guiding for the foreseeable future. Thankfully for Shikamaru they had arrived early so very few people saw him carrying a scribbling Naruto into the building and carefully setting him in a seat. "Honestly Shino I have no idea how he kept working while I was carrying him."

Shino nodded in agreement before getting Naruto's attention by having his insects obstruct Naruto's view. Spell broken, Naruto looked around and was confused, "What? When did I get to the Academy?"

Shikamaru sighed, "I carried you here since you refused to acknowledge anything else. Troublesome Blonde." He dramatically slammed his head on the desk, "I was going to meet up with Chōji but couldn't exactly explain why I was carrying you. You amuse and frustrate me at the same time Naruto. I'm just happy I didn't have to dress you this time." He smirked as he saw Naruto's embarrassment.

"Sorry Shika. I just kept so caught up -ttebayo." His verbal tick only ever came out when he was embarrassed these days. "Ohayo Shino. Ready for some exciting team assignments and glorious missions?"

The sarcasm wasn't missed but it was typical of Shino to give a simple, "Yes."

Naruto was going to go back to working on his new seal but Shikamaru took all his materials and threatened to strip search him if he even thought of taking out more. The act made Naruto pout which looked adorable to Shikamaru and amusing to Shino. Naruto would always act a child when somebody takes his seals from him. "You can pout all you want Naruto, but I don't plan on having to explain what you're working on and why you're dead to the world. You can have them back after Iruka does his thing." More pouting.

With no other option Naruto sat in his seat thinking as his arms unconsciously crossed themselves. 'I'm definitely not pouting. Stupid pineapple head taking away my work.' In his effort to not pout Naruto ended up pouting even more and as each member of the graduating class walked in they observed him mumbling under his breath about how unfair life was and how cruel pineapples were. Nobody else understood what was going on and just chalked it up to Naruto being weird. Naruto was dragged out of his pouting when there was a series of loud crashes and things shattering from the hallway. 'What on Earth is going on? I don't remember there being an earthquake.' Shikamaru merely groaned and took out a pair of earplugs. 'Huh. Why's he putting those in?' The earthquake was seemingly getting closer and closer to the room.

Finally, the epicenter reached the room and it was accompanied by the loudest shriek possible, "HA! Take that Ino-pig I got here first. That means I get to sit next to Sasuke-kun!" Naruto grabbed his ears at the offensive volume of Sakura's voice and made a note to get some earplugs later. He'd definitely need them.

Ino, while much quieter but still louder than necessary, countered, "What are you talking about Forehead. My toe crossed the threshold at least a few centimeters before yours. So, I get to sit next to Sasuke-kun!" What followed was an intense elbow shoving match between the two girls as they fought over who would sit next to Sasuke. Completely ignoring that there were two empty seats next to the brooding preteen.

Said brooding boy was too engrossed in his thoughts of revenge to immediately notice the stampeding girls making their way towards him. As they got closer he began to sense danger and would have reacted in horror if it wasn't unbecoming of an Uchiha. Instead he took to glaring angrily at both girls who merely squealed in delight at their precious Sasuke-kun noticing them. The volume was offensive even to those without sensitive hearing and Sasuke could distinctly hear two heads hit the desk and complain about their hearing. He didn't care enough to wonder who it was and was entirely too focused on trying to glare the bane of his existence to death. Iruka walked in and told everybody to quiet down after somehow

making his head expand in size. Sakura took the seat next to Sasuke while Ino glared at her. 'Great the Pink one is next to me. At least the Yellow one is quieter.'

Iruka stood before the class and waited for them to quiet down. His eyes wandered over his students as immense pride at seeing them getting ready to begin their careers welled within him. There was still disappointment that many of his female students were still fangirlish but in comparison to how it was before and previous years they were better off now. "Today each of you begins your journey down the path as a proud Leaf shinobi. This path is long, hard, and fraught with many dangers, but I am confident that you will all meet them with the strength and courage necessary to succeed." His eyes came to rest on Naruto, who was half-listening if he had to guess. "I am immensely proud to have taught each and every one of you. Each of you has been placed in a three-man unit under a jōnin-sensei you will meet after lunch. Pay attention as I call out your assignments." He was confused as to what to make of Naruto. He felt immense happiness and pride that Naruto seemingly turned himself around and became one of the better students in his class alongside Shikamaru, but he was sad that he and Naruto didn't spend as much time together as they used to. Iruka didn't know if it was something he did or not.

As Iruka proceeded to call out teams, various emotions and trains of thought were going through each new genin's mind. For Sakura, Ino, and the rest of the Sasuke fan club all they wanted was to be placed on a team with Sasuke by themselves. Sasuke was thinking that a team was only going to slow him down what with all the weaklings that were in this group. Kiba was thinking of how he'd have to assert that he was in charge. Hinata wanted to be with anyone except Sasuke or Naruto. Chōji didn't really care and already suspected which team he was on, so he focused on enjoying his favorite chips. Naruto, Shino, and Shikamaru already knew how the teams would be assigned and each was thinking about how to make their teams better.

The first handful of teams were called, and their structure was similar to how it was in the original timeline, so they were convinced that the rest of the teams would be the same. "Team 7 will consist of Uzumaki Naruto, Sakura Haruno, and Uchiha Sasuke."

At first Sakura was despondent over being stuck with Naruto but at hearing that Sasuke was on her team she had a complete turnaround. "Take that Ino-pig true love triumphs again!" She turned to gloat at Ino while Sasuke had a visible throbbing vein on his forehead at being stuck with the idiot and the banshee.

Iruka shook his head and continued, "Under Hatake Kakashi. Team 8 will consist of Hyūga Hinata, Inuzuka Kiba, and Aburame Shino. Your jōnin-sensei will be Yūhi Kurenai." Hinata was ecstatic at being placed under Kurenai if a little guarded at being with Shino. Kiba meanwhile was not happy at being placed under a female jōnin but felt confident that he'd be able to assert his dominance over the group. "Lastly, Team 10 will be Akimichi Chōji, Nara Shikamaru, and Yamanaka Ino."

Ino promptly exploded, "No way! Why does Sakura get to be with Sasuke-kun while I'm stuck with these two buffoons?!" She was frantically gesturing toward Shikamaru and Chōji who were seemingly ignoring her being used to this behavior.

"The teams were made this way to ensure that they were all properly balanced in terms of ability." Iruka remained calm and collected as he continued past Ino's outburst. "You are all free for lunch but return here to meet your jōnin-sensei. I wish you all the best of luck." He walked out of the room and smiled as he heard his former students start rushing out of the room to enjoy lunch. Their excitement was almost palpable, 'I do hope they all manage to pass their sensei's test.'

Shino and Shikamaru moved over to Naruto who suggested they eat with their teams, "As much as I'd like to have lunch with you guys, we should really go with our teams and start bonding. You two will be fine with your teams I think." Shino saw the logic in that decision. This lunch hour was meant to provide the new teams the opportunity to get to know one another better and they knew that they were being monitored to see if they would. Shino and Shikamaru would be able to bond easily with their groups, even if Ino was going to be complaining a lot. Naruto however, would not. Sasuke and Sakura were still exactly the same as before as unfortunate as it was. "I'd really love to have lunch with you two honestly, but we can't." Naruto glanced up at Shikamaru, "Can I have my fūinjutsu kit back now Shika?" He made sure to look as sweet and innocent as possible to make it impossible for Shikamaru to resist. He smiled brightly as Shikamaru tossed him the scroll containing his kit and gave him a hug, "Thanks Shika you're the best! See you guys after lunch?" Shino and Shikamaru nodded. Shino walked back to Hinata who was sitting with Kiba. There was a brief discussion before the three of them walked out for lunch. Shikamaru and Chōji were being berated by Ino who was insisting that she was in charge and that they'd have to listen to her. Naruto felt bad for the both of them. It'd be awhile before Ino calmed down and accepted she wouldn't always be in charge. Naruto looked back at his team and sighed with disappointment. Sakura was busy trying to get Sasuke to go on a date with her while Sasuke was doing his best to ignore everything. Still he had to make an effort as he couldn't just write them off. 'Except Sasuke. I'm still on the fence about him but Sakura at least I know can change.' He called out to them but only Sakura turned to look at him, "Hey. Want to get lunch? You know to get to know each other better?" The reaction was exactly what he suspected.

Sakura immediately assumed that Naruto was asking her on a date, "No way baka! Why the hell would I want to go on a date with you? Can't you see I'm talking to Sasuke-kun?" Sakura was incredibly annoyed by Naruto. Naruto was disappointed that she interpreted his words in the complete wrong way. 'Why can't that idiot just leave me alone!? CHA!' Deep down Sakura was confused by Naruto. Her mother always swore that he was nothing but trouble and that he shouldn't even be allowed to exist. This only got worse as her family seemed to lose so much of their influence so fast. This made Sakura fear Naruto to some degree, but she was far too infatuated with Sasuke to ever consider that Naruto wasn't interested in her and not trying to ruin her life.

Sasuke was doing his best to keep a handle on his mounting rage. 'First I get assigned to a useless team with the idiot and the banshee. As if I'd ever want to do anything with either of them!' This was not how Sasuke expected things to go. He felt assured that he would have been given a private instructor, one of the strongest in the village, who would give him the power he needs to kill Itachi and avenge his clan. A team was the last thing he needed. Having had enough of his teammates Sasuke stood up and growled out, "Why the hell would I want to eat with you dobe?" Sakura followed Sasuke's lead and berated Naruto for even trying to interact with them at all before following after Sasuke like a sick puppy.

Naruto just shook his head and pulled out his own lunch from one of his storage scrolls and began to eat, "Can't say I didn't try." Once he was done he went back to working on his own **Hiraishin (Flying Thunder God)** formula intending to be productive during the hour-long lunch. "Maybe I should work on a seal to make Sakura's voice quieter. Kami knows my hearing would thank me for that." He didn't care that he was talking to himself. He used to do it all the time when he was younger and constantly alone. "This is gonna suck, being assigned to a team with two people who hate me."

Unbeknownst to most of the fresh genin the jōnin had been observing the interactions between their respective teams already evaluating what they were seeing. Some were happy, most were not. Many jōnin still believed standards were too low for graduation and even if this batch was slightly more skilled than previous ones they were not optimistic. Even if they did pass them they'd have to put so much work into making them useful, and

that was maddening. Being a sensei was hard enough without having to deal with a cracked foundation.

Right now, Hatake Kakashi belonged to the group that was not happy, but not because of low standards. He saw his team in his students and his team had hardly ended spectacularly. Kakashi, Asuma, and Kurenai were all intrigued by their students' interaction that centered around Naruto. Shikamaru and Shino seemed to defer to Naruto's judgement and followed his lead. While Kurenai and Asuma saw no issue with that as it was good for genin to be able to work with others outside their team, Kakashi was concerned that their relationship would negatively impact his plans for his students. Not to mention that Naruto seemed to quite skilled in fūinjutsu if what he was observing was any indication. Kakashi may not have been a seal master but he was no slouch and even if he didn't know what Naruto was working on he could tell that he wasn't just messing about. 'This is going to be a problem.' All the reports that Kakashi had read indicated that Naruto wasn't particularly smart or skilled in anything. Yet what he was seeing contradicted that. The fact that a traitor had been working in the Academy for years and focused solely on sabotaging Naruto never even crossed his mind. Kakashi's plan was simple. Encourage Sasuke and Naruto to develop a rivalry that would tie Sasuke to the village and avoid an eventual defection. Meanwhile he'd be able to bring Sakura and Naruto up to passable level while he focused on training Sasuke to make him think he couldn't get stronger without him and therefore further keep him in the village.

"I don't envy you at all Kakashi," Asuma let out a puff of smoke, "not even ten minutes in and your team is already a mess." Asuma was happy to see that his team seemed to be getting along even if Ino would be a problem. She was overconfident in her abilities, was quick to shift blame if she was unable to do something, and quick to anger if she didn't get her way. Still the Ino-Shika-Chō always ended up being an exceptional group with near flawless teamwork. It helps that these three were practically raised together. "You have your work cut out for you, I wish you luck." Asuma had decided to forego the teamwork test in favor of solely gauging their abilities. He turned to face his father, "See you round pops. Thanks for giving me these kids. I'm going to go do a bit more research on them while I have the time." The rest of the jōnin made similar overtures to the Hokage. Even if they hated the thought of having to do this they wouldn't half ass it.

The Hokage watched as Kakashi studied each of his students, "You have quite the team this year Kakashi. They each have the potential for greatness within them." It was clear to Hiruzen that Kakashi was troubled, "What are you thinking Kakashi?" Hiruzen knew that Kakashi knew he couldn't fail this team. One does not fail an Uchiha, especially the 'last' Uchiha, nor can he fail Minato's son.

"I'm thinking that somebody screwed up somewhere." Naruto not being an idiot really threw off a lot of his plans. "The reports told me a very different story of Naruto than the Naruto I'm seeing here. If I may ask?" A nod from the Hokage and he continued, "Who taught Naruto fūinjutsu?"

Hiruzen took a puff from his pipe, "I do not know." Kakashi seemed both disbelieving and concerned at the prospect. "I have summoned Jiraiya back to inspect the status of the seal but that was nearly a year ago now and still he has not appeared. I do not know who taught him fūinjutsu or who has helped him with any of his other skills." Much like Shikaku, Hiruzen didn't believe that Naruto was hiding his skills for so long. It left the question of where an outcast orphan with no one to help him learn, learn all that he knew, unanswered. "He is also partially aware of his heritage and I suspect he knows of his father, but I cannot say for certain." This created even more problems as far as Kakashi was concerned. "Do not screw this up Kakashi. And find out if and who he has been dealing with." Too many secrets existed around Naruto and know secrets the Hokage was unaware of were also there. That was a problem he couldn't let go of regardless of his personal feelings.

"Yes sir." Kakashi left intent on breaking into his students' home to learn more about them. He wouldn't pick them up until at least three or four anyway, so he might as well learn more about them, things that aren't in reports.

Lunch was nearing its end and many of the new genin elected to return early rather than be late for their jōnin-sensei. Naruto of course was oblivious to everybody coming back in which got Shikamaru shaking his head. 'We really need to get a handle on Naruto's focus problem.' It wasn't ever good to get so distracted all the time even if they were in the relative safety of the village. Disaster struck at any moment. Shikamaru would have interrupted Naruto's work if he didn't already know that Kakashi would be at least three hours late. One by one the jōnin came to pick up their students. A familiar voice and the smell of smoke alerted Shikamaru that his sensei had arrived. "Team 10 follow me." Ino started yelling at Shikamaru and Chōji to hurry up even though they were both right behind her. They followed Asuma to Training Ground 10 which would be their designated meeting point from now on. "Before we begin I want you all to introduce yourselves. Name, likes, dislikes, dreams, and hobbies. I'll start. My name is Sarutobi Asuma. I like smoking, trying different types of tobacco, and taking things easy." 'And also, a certain red eyed kunoichi who specializes in genjutsu.' He noticed Shikamaru grinning at him as if he had heard his thoughts. "I dislike traitors, people who annoy me about smoking," he blew smoke in their direction and laughed as they all coughed, "people who take things too seriously, and people who can't be serious when the situation calls for it. My dream for the future is none of your business although I want to see each of you become the best shinobi you possibly can. Finally, my hobbies include playing shogi, smoking, sparring with skilled opponents, and taking it easy."

Ino was disappointed with her sensei's attitude which reminded her too much of Shikamaru, and started the genin off, "My name is Yamanaka Ino. I like keeping up with the latest fashions, village gossip, flowers, and Sasuke-kun." No surprise there to anyone. It was well known that Ino was almost the focal point of the village's gossip network. "I dislike Forehead, laziness," she leveled a steely gaze at Asuma, who wasn't the least bit concerned by the fresh genin's threat, "not getting my way," Asuma admired her honesty at that point, "and ruining my beautiful figure. My hobbies are gossiping, growing flowers, and taking care of my hair. My dream for the future is to become a successful kunoichi and land Sasuke-kun as the perfect obedient husband."

Asuma sweat dropped at the last comment. "Alright," he pointed at Chōji, "you're up next."

Chōji was shoveling a handful of chips into his mouth, "My name is Akimichi Chōji." Asuma thought for sure he wouldn't be able to understand the boy with his mouth full but evidently the Akimichi have learned the art of talking with one's mouth full. "I like barbeque, trying new types of foods, cooking with my kaa-chan, and hanging out with my friends." Chōji proceeded to open up another bag of chips to Asuma's amusement and Ino's annoyance. "I dislike people who belittle my clan because they think we're fat, being called fat, and people who hurt my friends." Asuma approved of his last dislike at least. "My hobbies are cooking and trying new foods, hanging out with Shikamaru, and practicing my family's jutsu. My dream for the future is to try every food dish in the world at least once and create my own signature dish." In many ways Asuma thought Chōji would have been better off being a chef. Chōji probably would have been a chef had he not been the current heir of the Akimichi clan.

Asuma turned to Shikamaru who had apparently fallen asleep. 'This one and I are going to get along just fine.' He flicked his cigarette butt at the sleeping genin who surprised him by swatting it away. "You're the last one, hop to it."

Shikamaru sighed, "Nara Shikamaru. I like sleeping, lazing around, cloud watching, Naruto," that got everybody except Chōji's attention, "and shogi. I dislike loud people," That confused everyone as they thought Naruto fit that description quite well, "troublesome people especially the blonde kind," that annoyed Ino and again everybody thought Naruto qualified, "and having to do any real work. My hobbies are sleeping, not working, and playing shogi against challenging opponents," he smirked at Asuma, "and sometimes easy opponents." He smiled when Asuma

clearly took the bait. "My dreams for the future are to become an exceptional shinobi then settle down and have a small family. Two kids. One boy, one girl. Then spending the rest of my days playing shogi and taking care of my family."

"My that's...oddly specific." Asuma was surprised at the simplicity of his dream yet intrigued by the apparent contradiction of his overall introduction. 'For someone who hates working, being an exceptional shinobi seems out of character.' Still he felt pretty good about his team. They all had their faults, but they were unique. "Alright. Now that we all know each other a little better its time for your assessment."

Ino looked at Asuma confused, "What kind of assessment sensei?"

Asuma grinned, "Well ordinarily the jōnin-sensei give their prospective students a test to see if they're worth wasting time on." He smiled more when Ino gave him an angry look. "I however have decided to skip that test. Instead this is about seeing where your skills are individually and as a group to help me decide how we'll train going forward. To that end your first objective is to survive." With that Asuma shot up and rushed at Chōji at low chūnin speed and nailed the boy in the face with a right hook who wasn't expecting a fight right now. At the same time, he kicked Ino in the stomach forcing her away. Shikamaru however seemed prepared for his sudden attack and was already manipulating his shadow to try and capture him. "Good, one of you at least appears to maintain vigilance for potential attacks, but what will you do when you can't capture me with your shadow?" To prove his point Asuma started dodging Shikamaru's shadow as he took out a handful of shuriken and threw them at the stationary target. To his credit Shikamaru dodged out of the way but it gave Asuma the opening he needed to nail him in the gut with a punch that knocked the air from his lungs. "You three need to do better than this." When Ino started shouting about not being ready Asuma got annoyed, "Do you think your enemies will always announce their attacks? The best tool in a shinobi's arsenal is surprise!" Now at least they were focusing on him and doing a better job avoiding attacks and sending some of their own. They weren't coordinating very well so when Chōji used his **Bubun Baika no Jutsu (Partial Expansion Technique)** to throw a massive punch at Asuma he failed to account for Ino moving to stab at Asuma with a kunai. Asuma dodged out of the way as both attacks came toward him which resulted in Ino being hit by Chōji. Chōji too his credit saw what was going to happen and did his best to minimize the damage that would have been done or else Ino might have been seriously injured.

Having had enough of playing by Asuma's rules Shikamaru shouted, "We need to regroup and refocus." Chōji fell in beside Shikamaru while Ino was still struggling to get up. 'This isn't good there aren't a lot of shadows around here for me to manipulate. Clever bastard setting the field up for himself.' Shikamaru was practically useless in an open field like this, as was Chōji whose attacks were too slow and easily avoidable unless Shikamaru or Ino caught their target. Still there was an easy way to create more shadows thanks to Chōji, "Chōji grow your arm again and try to hit Asuma when I tell you to, okay?" Chōji nodded, "First thing we need to do is get to Ino." This may not have been a teamwork-oriented test but that didn't change that they worked best as a team. "I'll be the distraction while you get to Ino. Make your arm as large as you think you can. Once I have Asuma get Ino." He needed a lot of shadow to work with if he wanted to stop Asuma for any amount of time. Asuma had allowed them time to formulate a plan but Shikamaru knew he was only doing so to see what they could do. Shikamaru started chasing Asuma with his shadow as best he could with its limited range, "Now Chōji!"

"**Bubun Baika no Jutsu (Partial Expansion Technique)**!" Chōji shouted and charge at Asuma as he sent a massive fist toward Asuma again. It was still incredibly slow but Shikamaru didn't need it to hit, he just needed the shadow the arm would create. The extra shadow and attack by Chōji would distract Asuma long enough for him to capture him with his shadow. Or so Shikamaru hoped, he didn't actually think it would work. True to form Asuma kept running circles around them, but Ino was starting to get up again as well.

Now Shikamaru joined Chōji fighting Asuma with taijutsu. He wasn't that great at it but hurting Asuma wasn't the goal again. Shikamaru knew that Asuma knew as much about their abilities as everybody else, and it was well known that the Akimichi were the physical fighters of the group. Shikamaru smirked as Asuma looked surprised that he would get in close with him. All he needed was a single hit and they could win. 'Just one hit!' Shikamaru and Chōji were getting tired and Ino still hadn't recovered, or decided to help, Shikamaru wasn't sure which one was truer. Finally, he managed to land a single blow on Asuma. It was weak and Asuma didn't even flinch at the contact still he smiled which confused Asuma. "You know sensei most people think the Nara manipulate shadows, but that's not true. We don't manipulate shadows we become them!" He jumped back to create distance between him and Asuma as his shadow stretched to hold onto Asuma's, "Chōji protect Ino, Ino use your family's jutsu on him before he breaks free!" Shikamaru knew he couldn't hold Asuma for long and the only hope they had was if Ino captured him and they could restrain him.

Ino didn't like being bossed around by the laziest shinobi ever to exist, but she also wanted revenge against Asuma for all those cheap shots. She ran a bit closer to meet up with Chōji and shouted, "**Shintenshin no Jutsu (Mind Body Switch Technique)**!" If she missed they'd lose, and if she hit they might win. The **Shintenshin no Jutsu** wasn't full proof and like the **Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Possession Technique)** one could overpower it if their will was strong enough and stronger than Ino's. Shikamaru had no doubt that Asuma would be able to break out of both easily if he really wanted.

Ino's body fell to the ground and Asuma stopped struggling. Shikamaru was skeptical that it worked but he wasn't one to pass up on an opportunity. "Chōji tie him up!" As Chōji got closer and started tying Asuma up his eyes opened, and he smiled at Chōji as Ino sat up.

"Well done you three that's enough for now." Asuma stood up as Shikamaru collapsed on the ground and complained at how tiring and troublesome this was before sighing dramatically. Asuma was happy with the level of teamwork and coordination they eventually displayed but he frowned as he thought of Ino. Chōji's hit should not have kept her down for so long. As he looked over his panting genin he knew where he'd have to start with all of them. "Endurance and stamina is definitely something we'll be working on going forward. Still I'm happy with how well you all worked together, especially you Shikamaru." Using Chōji's jutsu to not only make him a larger threat but also extend Shikamaru's range was a good feint to lead into a direct attack from the shadow user. 'Shikamaru hardly looks like a physical threat and he used that to his advantage by manipulating me into my preconceptions about Naras. Well, well looks like I have my hands on a tactician in the making.' It wasn't that surprising; all Naras had a penchant for strategy. "Now that I've seen how you guys do as a team we'll spar one on one." His genin were still panting. He chuckled and rubbed his neck, "Maybe we'll take a break first?" They all sagged with relief at that. Asuma took out a cigarette and sat on the ground enjoying his smoke break while his genin rested. After smoking a couple cigarettes Asuma ushered his genin back together, "Alright sparring time. Each of you will spar against me and alternate between attacking and defending when I say. Whoever isn't sparring will watch and point out flaws when we finish." Shikamaru seemed to be the most recovered, then Chōji, and lastly Ino. Asuma knew that Ino thought poorly of Chōji for his eating habits and that he'd never be able to be a shinobi that way. 'Yet Ino is the one struggling the most with the physical demands, and surprisingly Shikamaru is handling it best.' "Shikamaru you're up first." Shikamaru groaned as Asuma started out by attacking him.

Asuma spent the rest of the afternoon 'educating' his genin on their weaknesses. Each of his genin were surprisingly observant and did well pointing out each other's flaws but one of them wasn't good at taking criticism. 'They need a lot of work but they're a good group.' Having a good idea what they all needed help with Asuma set about planning a training program for each of them. He dismissed his team and told them to meet him here tomorrow at noon.

Yūhi Kurenai arrived for her students just after Asuma had taken his. It definitely wasn't a coordinated effort to not arrive together. 'We're only friends after all.' She looked over her genin and smiled when she saw Hinata, "Team 8 with me." She frowned as she noticed Kiba start drooling at her appearance. Yes, she dressed in a way that was provocative and Kiba was at that age, but he needed better control over his emotions if he was to survive. If he was fooled by every woman with a pretty face and a full body than he'd die young. She led her team to their designated training ground where she had spent time preparing a small test for her team. "Why don't we start with introductions, so we can all get to know each other better?" Seeing her team nod in agreement, "I'll start. My name is Yūhi Kurenai and I'm a new jōnin. I like takowaso, genjutsu, my friend Anko, and a good bottle of shōchū. I dislike foods that are overly sweet, shinobi who don't take their career seriously, fangirls, and chauvinists. My hobbies include spending a night out drinking with my friends and developing new genjutsu. My dream for the future is to help make you all into the best shinobi possible."

Kiba being the most extroverted of the group went next. "My name is Inuzuka Kiba and this is my buddy Akamaru!" The white puppy on his head yipped and wagged his tail. "I like training and going for walks with Akamaru. I dislike chewy foods, traitors, and people who think or ninken are just pets! My hobbies are the same as my likes and my dream for the future is to join the Hunter-nin corps." The Inuzuka clan prided themselves on their tracking abilities and the Hunter corps was a perfect place to put their talents to use.

"An ambitious goal, good. It's important to push yourself to be the best you can." Kurenai looked toward Hinata and smiled warmly at her. "Hinata, would you care to go next?"

"H-h-hai sensei." Hinata tried to make herself as small as possible once she felt her teammates eyes fall on her. "M-m-my name is H-y-Hyūga Hinata. I I-I-like my s-s-sister, Kurenai-sensei, a-a-and c-cinnamon buns. I dislike many things about my clan, hurting my friends and family, and people who are cruel." Kurenai was both surprised and happy to see Hinata getting through talking about herself with very little stuttering but wondered what had happened to prompt such a change. "My hobbies are flowering pressing and making my own medicinal creams. My dream for the future is to become a strong kunoichi worthy of my clan and to change my clan's ways."

Kurenai smiled at Hinata with pride at her student which made said girl try to hide within her coat even more, "Very good Hinata. I look forward to helping you with your goals." She turned to and pointed at Shino, "And finally, you."

"I am Aburame Shino. I like entomology, training, and the few friendships I have. I dislike people who kill insects for no reason, those that would maliciously injure my comrades, and strong-smelling foods. My hobbies are collecting new insect specimens for my collection and breeding new insects. My dreams are to become a shinobi capable of protecting the Leaf and its inhabitants, to secure a peaceful future for my friends and family, and to find my brother."

"Your brother?" Kurenai didn't see any mentions of a brother in the reports she had read on Shino.

"Yes, my adoptive brother disappeared many years ago. Until I see a body I will continue to hope that he is alive and well somewhere." Kurenai was skeptical that there wasn't more to the story. She enough of the Aburame to know that they were logical thinkers and to hold out hope despite no indication that they may be alive seems out of character. Then again even the Aburame can be swayed by emotion.

"Wonderful. Each of you are unique and have your own goals." She smiled at each of her genin, "I look forward to helping each of you achieve your goals." She had spent a week with Anko preparing for her first genin team. She adopted a playful smirk as she looked at her genin, "Assuming of course. You become genin." At their confused looks, except Shino, her smirk turned ever more playful and teasing, "After all you didn't think such a simple exam at the Academy would be the deciding factor if you become shinobi, did you? No. It's the jōnin-sensei who decide if you become shinobi, and if I don't think you're capable I'll either send you to the reserve program or drop you altogether."

As she suspected Kiba was the one who cried out indignantly, "But that's not fair! We all worked here to get here!"

"Life isn't fair, shinobi life less so. You'll just have to pass my test and deal with it." Her voice was no longer warm and motherly but stern and harsh. 'Anko was right this is so much more fun! I'll have to treat her to dango as a thank you.' She ignored the growling from Kiba, "Your objective is simple: find me before sundown." With that she disappeared in a swirl of rose petals.

Hinata and Shino recognized it as a genjutsu while Kiba didn't but knew her scent was gone. Shino spoke up first, "We should work together to find her. Why? Because each of us have a different way to follow her and there is no doubt she knows this and has made it difficult for each of us to find her on our own."

Kiba was all for working together, pack sticks together, but found Shino's way of speaking to verbose. "Dude just say its easier to find her together." It was a very familiar argument for the duo.

"There is nothing wrong with my manner of diction." Kiba shook his head at that. Shino and Kiba always had an odd friendship. They were opposites of each other in so many ways. Kiba was loud and extroverted while Shino was quiet and introverted. Kiba liked to face trouble head on, Shino preferred an indirect approach. Yet they had been great friends despite how the ruffled each other's feathers. "But I will alter my speech in favor of cooperation."

Kiba and Akamaru were sniffing the air trying to pick up Kurenai's scent. She had masked her scent but not all of it. They were able to pick up the scent of her shampoo, and it smelled very flowery like roses. "She went this way!" He started leading them away from the village proper deeper toward the woods. As they started walking into the forest Kurenai's scent was everywhere. It led them in circles and made them double back more times than Kiba could follow. It was frustrating and Kiba was not handling the frustration well, "Damn it! Where is she?!" Hinata mumbled out that Shino said she likely knew what we all could do and made her test to reflect that. "Well one of you do something then!" Hinata flinched at Kiba's frustration.

"Hinata-san why don't you use your Byakugan to scan the forest. My insects track scent much like Kiba and Akamaru do so I would be of no use here, you however have eyes that can see through the forest much easier than us." Shino was trying his best to adjust his speech to a way that Kiba would tolerate in an effort to both keep him from becoming even more frustrated and getting their mission done as quickly as possible.

Hinata activated her Byakugan and saw Kurenai standing deeper in the forest. "She's this way," she squeaked out. Kiba and Shino started following her. Kiba was still growling which was concerning for his teammates. He was confident in his ability to follow people's scents and prided himself on that. It was always a skill that he'd be better at than anybody else. Not even Shino's insects could follow a scent as well as an Inuzuka and their ninken, unless the scent being followed was a female kikaichū. As they got closer to where Kurenai was Hinata suddenly cried out in pain and deactivated her Byakugan. "She...she flooded the area with so much chakra!" For a Hyūga with their Byakugan active it was particularly painful to suddenly have so much chakra appear.

Shino nodded in agreement, he could feel the chakra permeating the air. "It's my turn then." He raised his arms and let his hive swarm out of his body to begin devouring the chakra in the air. This would also serve to let his insects get a better read on her scent, so they could find her again. 'No doubt the Kurenai in the clearing was merely a rouse to draw Hinata into a chakra laden field to disrupt her Byakugan. She is testing our adaptability while also working as a team.' His insects started eating the chakra in the air and the slightly oppressive feeling began to dissipate.

Kiba shouted, "I have her scent again it leads back to the village!" Now that the insects had eaten the rest of the chakra in the air the technique Kurenai had used to mask her scent was erased as well. Kiba took off back toward the Academy with Shino and Hinata hot on his heels. "This way!"

Hinata had her Byakugan active during the run and was carefully looking for their sensei. As they got closer to the Academy and the Hokage tower Hinata saw her atop the mountain, "She's on top of the Hokage Monument." Shino was sending his insects that way to confirm that it was indeed her and not more chakra constructs or genjutsu.

Kurenai had been watching her students as they followed her trail. 'I really must thank Anko for helping me today. She didn't get to play with my students the way she wanted to, but she made this test possible.' Anko took the place of Kurenai after the test began so that she could see how they interacted with each other. She was surprised by how quickly they had started working together. Kiba she expected. The Inuzuka clan placed loyalty to the pack as their highest priority. She figured Hinata would just follow the other two. 'Truthfully I expected them to go at it on their own for a few hours and then lead them each back toward the others so that they knew they couldn't do it alone.' Then Shino had been the one to suggest working together immediately. 'He's not like any Aburame I've heard about or worked with.' The fact that they immediately started working together turned out to be a greater boon to learning more about them. Kiba was far too easily influenced by his emotions. Hinata despite her earlier confidence was still too self-conscious. Shino had been difficult to read, but she could tell that he was confident in his ability and the ability of his teammates despite having only their time at the Academy to go off of. Her students walked up and sat down in front of where she was sitting. "Well you three exceeded my expectations. You got here much sooner and faster than I anticipated." Her voice was back to being warm and caring, "As of this moment we are Team 8 and you are my students." Kiba whooped with joy and even Hinata was smiling brightly. Shino was as stoic as ever. "We'll meet at training ground 8 tomorrow morning at 0900 hours and discuss your performance and go over how we'll be training. You all are dismissed." She watched as her students left before asking, "What do you think of them Anko?"

Another woman walked up the side of the Hokage's face, "They aren't terrible." In other words, they suck but have potential and need a lot of work. "The girl is particularly worrisome. She needs some serious help." It annoyed Anko that Hinata was so meek and still arguably the best and strongest female of the year. "If you ever need help with her let me know. The world needs more skilled kunoichi and she's the only one I'd be willing to work with and not just utterly destroy before rebuilding." There was a reason why Anko never received a team of genin to train beyond only being a tokubetsu jōnin with a focus in torture and interrogation. She wasn't a people person and tended to rub people the wrong way.

"I agree. Though I'm more worried about Kiba. He's far too emotional and distracted. I know he's a boy and about to enter or in puberty but if a pretty face distracts him," she smirked at Anko, "well we both know how dangerous a pretty face can be." Anko met her smirk with one of her own.

"He seems pretty cocky, no doubt if he found himself in such a situation he'd probably enjoy it." Kiba seemed exactly the type to not care that he was about to die so long as a pretty girl was there and entertaining him.

Kurenai frowned in agreement, "Honestly I feel he needs the most work. Hinata just needs support and to get away from her screwed up family." Hiashi had pretty much thrown Hinata aside and left her training up to Kurenai. He didn't even care what she might do with her. "Kiba though...it will take time to establish that he is not the alpha of this group and make him listen to me." She looked back at Anko, "I owe you a lot of dango. Perhaps I should start repaying you now?" Anko smiled at the prospect of dango and promptly jumped off the mountain to head toward her favorite place. Kurenai laughed and took the casual way down. 'I'm sure by the time I get there Anko will have eaten a cartload of dango.' Debts to Anko were often expensive, or painful, or both it depends on her mood.

Kakashi, as he always did, left his team waiting for him in the classroom and made his way toward Sakura's house first. She was the only one of his student with parents that would make breaking in more...troublesome than he really wanted to deal with. Kakashi did something he never does. He knocked on the door and waited for it to be opened. Sakura's mother was the one to answer the door and asked what he wanted. 'She seems rude, hopefully Sakura doesn't take after her.' Forgetting that he had already observed some of Sakura's behavior and she was absolutely her mother's daughter. "I am your daughter's jōnin-sensei and I was hoping I could speak to you to get to know your daughter better." The rudeness of before was immediately replaced with a mother who loved to gush and fuss over their daughter. Kakashi was invited in and chat (listened) as Haruno Mebuki went on and on about her daughter. Mebuki was immensely proud of how Sakura had graduated the top of her class from the Academy. However, it also became abundantly clear that Mebuki's intentions for Sakura to become a shinobi were to marry into a power and influential family. 'Great so now I have to deal with a girl who has no idea of the reality of shinobi life.' Still it was useful to glean insight into Sakura's personality and if she was anything like her mother she would be a problem to deal with. Arrogant, self-assured, blind, and unrealistic. After 20 more minutes of feigning politeness Kakashi made an excuse to leave and thanked the woman for her time. He could not have been happier to be out of there as he pulled out the latest book of the Icha Icha series and began to read. He giggled to himself, 'Oh Kyouko, you naughty girl that doesn't go there!'

He slowly made his way to the Uchiha district. 'Why Sasuke has been allowed to live here in this ghost town is beyond my understanding.' After his father committed suicide Kakashi had promptly moved out and not once stepped foot back in the building. Walking through the vacant district you could feel how empty and oppressive the atmosphere was. The only house that was still lived in was the main house. Kakashi wasted no time disarming the traps the boy had set up being careful to remember their exact construction and purpose, so he could rebuild them once he left. 'At least his traps suggest decent training.' The inside of the house was almost worse than the streets outside. The house itself felt cold and barren. The walls still showed signs that people had lived there with pictures hanging from the wall. Clearly Itachi had been meticulously carved out of each and every family portrait. Despite still living in the building it was clear Sasuke only used his room, the kitchen, and the backyard. Every other room was layered in dust and Kakashi doubted he had ever opened any of the other rooms. Except one. It was covered in scorch marks and ash permeated the air. 'This must have been Itachi's room. Although I am impressed at the level of control needed to burn the entire room without destroying the house.' There was nothing else that showed Sasuke had any emotion besides hate. His room itself was empty and contained only a bed. Yet Kakashi could make out the signs that the room had once been decorated. The paint was faded where frames used to hang, and the carpet contained indentations that indicated a desk once graced the room. Walking into the backyard Kakashi saw a training dummy that looked and was dressed suspiciously like Itachi. Puncture marks littered the dummy and there were still kunai and shuriken imbedded deeply into the wood. 'This is no place for a child.' Kakashi knew Sasuke was unlikely to leave at this point which was only going to contribute to the problem. It gave him a massive headache. He rearmed the traps as he left the house and walked away from the eerie quiet as quickly as he could. It made even him uncomfortable to be there for any amount of time.

Kakashi walked to his last student's home. 'I stand corrected, *this* is no place for a child.' Kakashi was familiar with the building but it had seemingly worsened over the years. He saw people who he could only imagine were prostitutes coming and going frequently from the lower floor. From the sheer volume of people near one of the rooms he could only assume they were quite popular, and with a surprising diversity in clients. Most people ignored him as he made his way up the stairs to Naruto's apartment, but a few hurried away faster with his presence. Standing on the landing he could easily tell which apartment was Naruto's. Since they couldn't damage his property anymore they had taken to painting insults all along the walls as you approached the room. To say it made his anger bubble to the surface would be an understatement at some of what was written on those walls. Things like demon, monster, murderer, child killer, and the like had been scrawled repeatedly on the walls. Other messages were more disturbing. Some promised him unimaginable torture before they would leave him a broken mess to suffer in agony as he slowly died. One even promised to make Naruto into his bitch in ways that both excited and frightened Kakashi at the level of hatred some people were willing to express. Breaking in had been harder than Kakashi expected and the seals protecting his student's home were quite good and layered atop one another to better protect himself. Once inside it was similar to Sasuke's home, albeit every room was meticulously kept clean. There wasn't a single personal touch in the entire apartment. The walls were bare and the wallpaper, at least he thought it was wallpaper, was peeling everywhere and revealed wood that was near rotten from water damage and termites. Trying to enter the bedroom was more difficult than the actual house. The traps and seals inside were far more lethal than the ones meant to keep people out. 'The amount of fear he must experience to go to such lengths in his own home.' Once inside the room it too gave little insight into Naruto other than how clean it was. Seeing no point in looking more Kakashi left and reflected on his visits to each of his students' home, 'Well that wasn't nearly as enlightening as I had hoped. Sakura had an unrealistic expectation of life as a shinobi, Sasuke thought only of revenge, and Naruto looked ready to run at the first sign of trouble.' All things he already knew. 'What a colossal waste of time.' He still had a couple hours left until he'd pick up his team, so he made his way to the memorial stone.

Meanwhile Sakura was growing increasingly frustrated. Their sensei was hours late and it was annoying her. She had tried to pass the time by talking with Sasuke, but he just sat there quietly. Of course, Sakura interpreted this as part of his personality that only stoked her opinion that Sasuke was hot. She was however looking for an outlet for her frustration and the only other option was Naruto. Her blonde teammate had spent the entire afternoon ignoring both of them in favor of working on something that she assumed was just a meaningless doodle. Sakura didn't like being ignored (except by Sasuke) and still tried to use Naruto as a means to make herself feel better when Sasuke or somebody else inadvertently upset her. But she couldn't do that when he was completely ignoring everything. She left Sasuke alone, much to his relief, and moved to stand next to Naruto and look at what he was doing. To her it made no sense and reinforced her opinion that Naruto was an idiot who couldn't do anything. She started staring daggers at him as he continued to ignore her. As she was reaching to rip his work away from him a hand grabbed her wrist in a vice.

"If you know what's good for you Haruno you'll stop thinking about what you were about to do." Naruto's voice was cold and harsh. He had spent the last forty hours working on this and was not about to let her ruin it by being an obnoxious bitch. He kept her wrist captured until he was certain she wouldn't do anything stupid, well as certain as he could be with Sakura. The Sakura of right now was too obsessed with Sasuke to think clearly. Naruto packed up his materials both to protect them from Sakura and prepare for Kakashi's arrival who he felt walking lazily down the hall.

Sakura didn't know what to do. She wanted to put Naruto down which would make herself feel better, but she was too scared of what he might do if she actually tried to do anything. Instead she resorted to falling back on a classic, playing it off as Naruto trying to act like Sasuke. She flipped her hair as she walked away swaying her hips hoping to entice Sasuke, who wasn't paying any attention at all to what they were doing, "Idiot. You should really stop trying to act as cool as Sasuke." Naruto just rolled his eyes and continued to seal up his belongings.

Kakashi opened the door to the classroom and his eardrums were assaulted by Sakura's grating voice as she shouted that he had finally arrived. 'Perhaps Naruto is on the right track with that seal to modulate the volume of her voice.' He looked over to see that Naruto and Sasuke had both covered their ears, but Naruto seemed to be in the most pain. "Hmm. My first impression of you three is..." he paused for dramatic effect. "I hate you." The reactions were mostly what he expected. Sakura deflated and looked ready to cry, and Sasuke was trying to glare him to death. Naruto didn't do anything other than finish cleaning his brush and putting it away. "Meet me on the roof." He disappeared in a swirl of leaves as he executed a **Shunshin (Body Flicker)**. Naruto followed suit sans the leaves and smoke that usually accompanied one. Neither of his teammates noticed his departure.

Kakashi reappeared on the roof followed closely behind by Naruto. "I see you know the **Shunshin no Jutsu (Body Flicker Technique)** Naruto. Impressive." And mildly irritating, "Who taught it to you?"

Naruto's only response was calm, "Nobody."

Kakashi hummed as he leaned back against the railing and pulled out his Icha Icha to read while he waited for the rest of his students to arrive. He subtly observed Naruto who leant against his own railing away from where Kakashi had planned on having his genin sit. Sakura and Sasuke would join them two minutes later, "We'll have to work on your speed it took you two far too long to get up here." Sakura looked confused while Sasuke sent a heated glare at Naruto for somehow getting by him unnoticed. "Sit and let's talk." Naruto was the only one who didn't sit near either of them, "Plan on joining the group Naruto?"

Naruto looked at him, "Seeing as how Sakura already tried to destroy something I was working on I'll stay over here, thank you." Sakura seemed to shrink at hearing the blonde's words.

Kakashi however, didn't care, "Right. Well then genin Uzumaki sit by your teammates." The tone of his voice was indicative of an order not a suggestion or invitation. 'At least Naruto obeys orders.' Naruto moved to sit by his teammates though he kept a noticeable distance between them and him. "Why don't we start with introductions? Your likes, dislikes, hobbies, and dreams for the future things like that."

"Why don't you go first sensei? To show us how its done." Sakura didn't know what she should say about herself, plus their sensei looked real suspicious what with most of his face covered by a mask and his hitai-ate.

Kakashi groaned inwardly, '*This* is the top kunoichi of the class? How hard is it to not know how to introduce yourself?' Letting out an exasperated sigh Kakashi obliged, "My name is Hatake Kakashi. I have some likes and dislikes. As for dreams...hmm." he made an overexaggerated effort at thinking, "Well I have lots of hobbies!" He relished the look on his students faces as they realized he only told them his name. "Well then Pinky you're up." Kakashi took way too much enjoyment out of messing with people.

Sakura was annoyed by the nickname but went with it anyway, "My name is Haruno Sakura. I like..." glances at Sasuke, "I mean the person I like..." squeals at Sasuke, "My hobbies are..." more squealing, "and my dreams are..." the loudest possible squealing. When Kakashi asked what she hated she loudly proclaimed, "Ino-pig and Naruto-baka."

"Oh no what ever will I do! I'm so distraught, oh woe is me." Kakashi enjoyed Naruto's nonchalance at his teammate's hates and clearly didn't care one bit if she hated him. The feelings seemed mutual. Sakura however was not amused, and a vein was visibly throbbing on her forehead as she

huffed and crossed her arms in protest.

"You. The dark brooding emo kid go." Kakashi pointed at Sasuke who 'tsk'd' at being described as a brooding kid.

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I don't like anything, and I hate most everything." Sasuke had yet to look anywhere but at Kakashi. "What I have is not a dream because I will make it a reality! My ambition is to restore my clan and kill a certain someone."

Kakashi watched Naruto roll his eyes and mouth 'drama queen' while Sasuke swooned and started drooling over how hot Sasuke was. 'Why are genin always so annoying.' Point at Naruto, "And finally the blonde one."

Naruto decided to take a page from Kakashi's book. "Uzumaki Naruto. I like and dislike things. I have a dream and a few hobbies." He smirked as Kakashi seemed to be frustrated by his introduction.

Kakashi was wondering if he'd get in trouble for killing his students. Not even 30 minutes in and they were annoying him with how disappointing they were. "Those things would be?"

Naruto continued to annoy Kakashi, "Things." Sakura and Sasuke were both confused by what was happening.

"Am I going to have to order you to do everything Naruto?" Kakashi was quickly losing the battle of controlling his irritation. Naruto didn't help by noncommittally shrugging. "Well then I am ordering you to answer the questions.

"I like what I like. Dislike what I dislike. My dream is what I dream about. My hobbies are of no consequence." Kakashi's single eye was twitching now.

Naruto was obviously not going to tell him anything. "Let's just move on then, shall we?" Kakashi thought this team was perhaps going to be the worst he had ever tested, and worse he couldn't fail them. "Now, I know you all think you're shinobi, but the truth is you're not." Sakura and Sasuke reacted accordingly with Sakura loudly proclaiming that they had passed the graduation exam, "Sakura do a better job controlling the volume of your voice." Sakura looked down in embarrassment at the chastisement. "You may have passed the Academy's test, but you haven't passed mine. Every jōnin is allowed to test their prospective students to make sure their time won't be wasted." Sasuke seemed to approve of the concept even if he hated being compared to his two worthless teammates. "Tomorrow you will meet me at Training Ground 3 at 0500 for your test."

Sakura was confident that she could pass this test just as easily as the ones at the Academy. She was after all the kunoichi of the year. "Alright one more test. This will be easy!"

Kakashi started laughing at that statement, "I wouldn't be so sure of yourself if I were you." This was always his favorite part. "This test will be incredibly difficult and most of the potential genin will fail." At seeing Sakura silently ask, 'how hard could it possibly be?' Kakashi laughed even more, "You see this test has a 66% failure rate." Success. Sakura paled, and even Sasuke looked a little worried. Naruto was still as disinterested as he had been the entire time. "Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow." He got up from the railing getting ready to leave. "Oh, I almost forgot! You shouldn't eat breakfast tomorrow or you'll end up. Ja ne!" Kakashi executed another **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** into a nearby tree to watch his students react to the information.

To his surprise Naruto was the one to break the silence, "You both should eat breakfast tomorrow. Fighting on an empty stomach is idiotic."

"You idiot sensei told us not to!" Sakura was a stickler for rules and had interpreted Kakashi's statement as an order and not a recommendation.

Sasuke scoffed in either irritation or disappointment that he was stuck in this situation, 'Probably both.' Kakashi watched as he started leaving without ever uttering a single word to his teammates.

"We should go scout out the area and prepare for tomorrow." Naruto once more tried to be the voice of reason.

This time Sasuke did respond, "Why the hell should we listen to you dobe? Who would want to do anything with a loser like you." He turned back around and walked toward the door with Sakura agreeing with what he just said and following after him. It made Kakashi's headache even worse if such a thing was possible.

Naruto turned to gaze right at him which unnerved Kakashi. He was certain that he had hid his presence and was shocked to see his blonde student looking at him. "You know they won't work with me, right?"

Kakashi appeared back in front of Naruto. "I had heard that you had a sensing ability, but I am surprised to see it so well developed."

Naruto shrugged, "When people are trying to kill you every day of your life you learn how to survive, and when you fail to notice a threat you learn better." His words made Kakashi frown, but Naruto ignored it. "My point still stands. They'll never work with me, and they'll never work together." Naruto moved to leave but left Kakashi with a parting gift, "I hope you found your visit to my apartment enlightening." Naruto left Kakashi alone on the roof who was busy trying to evaluate the one who was quickly becoming his most difficult student.

Naruto was back home well before Shikamaru who was still training with his team. He was currently playing a game of shogi with Shikaku who had been pretty adamant about playing. Shikaku always liked to figure people out over a game of shogi and Yoshino being away on a mission seemed like the perfect time to confront Naruto. "So, you're in love with my son." Shikaku took one of Naruto's pawns with his knight as he made his statement.

Naruto responded by taking the knight with another pawn, "Yes."

Shikaku nodded and moved another piece, "How long?"

Naruto shrugged, "That's a complicated answer and we should really wait for Shikamaru to have that discussion."

That was a lot of information, 'So Shikamaru is a part of this. Which means that Shino most likely is as well.' Shikaku made a few more moves and noticed that Naruto was laying the foundation for a 'Climbing Silver' strategy. "Are you sure you want to proceed that way? Sacrificing one of your own pieces to secure a promotion is always a gamble." He moved a piece into position for Naruto to capitalize on while working on his own trap and strategy.

"Sacrifice is unavoidable. All one can do is make the best of what they have to work with." Naruto took Shikaku's offering. "I have no chance of defeating you without taking risks and even then, I'm almost certain that I'll lose." Naruto could still barely beat Shikamaru when they were both really going at it and had never played against Shikaku before. It was hard to read a man you know practically nothing about.

"Very true." Nothing more was said as they continued to exchange moves. Naruto's prediction turned true as Shikaku took the last of his generals. 'Three more moves and it's over.' Ordinarily his opponents would have conceded well before this point, but Naruto was always unpredictable and intended to make his victory as costly as possible. 'It seems you understand the value of shogi Naruto.' Concessions may mean that you can avoid more losses but if an enemy is too unwilling to surrender victory becomes costlier. Naruto excelled at making any victory against him expensive. Shikaku made his last move, "Checkmate." Naruto had extracted his toll though. Shikaku's own pieces were barely enough to secure a victory a far cry from when Shikaku and Naruto both knew that the game was over. "You never surrender do you?"

Naruto smiled, "I can't afford to give up." His eyes spoke volumes of his feelings. "In anything."

Shikaku nodded, "Another game?"

Naruto reset the board and made the first move after Shikaku offered it to him. "You know his position means he has to take a wife at some point, right?" He wouldn't forbid their relationship, but he had to lay down the fact that eventually it would have to end. Plus, the way Naruto played this game would reveal a lot about his intentions with his son. Something Shikaku was very curious about.

"I'm well aware of the politics." Shikaku watched as Naruto and he traded a few pieces. Naruto was clearly being more aggressive this time around, but aggressiveness wasn't always a benefit. "Doesn't mean I'll ever stop loving him, and if anyone thinks they can keep me away from him they're dead wrong."

Shikaku couldn't make sense of what Naruto was doing before he determined that Naruto's strategy was to have no strategy. 'Clever. Can't predict the unpredictable.' Naruto would make moves and apparently set up traps only to ultimately abandon them to strike at seemingly nowhere. Yet if one looked they could see Naruto pushing Shikaku. Each of his nonsensical moves cut off advancement or retreat for important pieces. Traps within feints hidden within traps. "I don't particularly care for the politics of the situation." Far be it from him to stand in the way of his son's happiness. "But I have to be a part of it." Shikamaru dragged himself through the door as the game continued. "Welcome home Shikamaru." Shikamaru groaned but dragged himself closer to the board to watch. He hadn't seen Naruto and Shikaku play and was curious how it was going. "Rough day?" More groans from Shikamaru. "Naruto and I have been having an interesting conversation."

Shikamaru looked at the board and saw the tell-tale signs of an aggressive non-strategy from Naruto. His own time spent playing with the blonde allowed him to make some guesses as to what it was about. Naruto was aggressive which means he feels threatened. Yet his moves are calculated, and he guards his king well, wariness. His knight had been promoted and yet it was in the very back, possessiveness. Shikamaru had told Naruto how Asuma thought of shinobi in terms of shogi pieces. "I'm guessing it was about me, or us." A nod from Shikaku confirmed it. "Now then the only question is if it was about our relationship, or something else."

"Both." Shikaku and Naruto were still playing their game, but Naruto's style had changed the moment Shikamaru arrived. He was a lot calmer and played much like he had before. "Are we going to talk about it or am I going to have to play 20 questions?"

Naruto conceded defeat having no interest in doing two things at once and distracting Shikaku. He set up the strongest silencing seal that he possibly could so that nobody would be able to overhear them. "Which would you like to discuss first?" There were so many things they could start with but better to let Shikaku drive the conversation.

Shikaku couldn't decide. He didn't think they'd volunteer the information so willingly. "Why don't we start with your relationship. How long?" He really wanted to know if he wasn't that observant or if they were just that careful.

Naruto's answered for them both, "We've been friends for ten maybe eleven years. Together for seven of those."

Shikaku was confused. If he was to believe Naruto they had been friends since they were practically born. Yet as he looked at Naruto and Shikamaru neither seemed to be lying or behaving in a way that was trying to deceive and obfuscate. "How?"

Naruto sighed and moved to sit between Shikamaru's legs, so he could lean against his chest. "That's a complicated answer. One we're not sure we can answer in a way you'll believe." Shikamaru wrapped his arms around Naruto's chest as the blonde got more comfortable, "The answer is time travel. Before we arrived here we were 24." Seeing Shikaku wanting to repeat his last question Naruto cut him off, "Fūinjutsu. It's a wonderful art capable of doing so much. In this case it sent the consciousness of three people into the past where they overwrote their younger counterparts consciousness."

Shikaku didn't care much for the phrasing of that. It sounded too much like they had killed their younger selves. In a way they did. "You can't expect me to believe this."

Shikamaru nodded, "We know. We spent the past year trying to figure out a way to convince you, but the problem is any information we have that the future you had the present you doesn't so we really can't convince you." For all the knowledge he possessed Shikaku just didn't have enough of it to make this easier. "We were fighting a war so knowing everything about the past wasn't exactly a priority. Neither were we planning on having to do this."

'Another war. Great.' Shikaku was having trouble believing everything. Still there were things that made more sense if he considered the possibility. It helped explain the how and why Naruto shifted from a loud mouth idiot into what he is now. It explained the behavioral changes in all three of them. Even so time travel was a difficult sell. "Say I believe you. Why'd you come back?"

They both looked upset by the question which didn't inspire confidence in Shikaku. "We had won the war, and the Great Nations were on the road to realizing a permanent peace. Just as Senju Hashirama had desired when he established Konohagakure and distributed the nine bijū to the other nations." That was surprising to Shikaku. He couldn't conceive of a situation where the Great Nations would pursue peace. It spoke volumes of the threat they must have faced. "The reason we came back is because Uchiha Sasuke destroyed the village. Burnt it all to ash and killed everybody who lived there."

"Why did Sasuke destroy the village." At seeing Naruto about to answer he cut him off, "Oh let me guess. 'That's a complicated question.'" Naruto smiling was beginning to irritate him. 'Everything is a complicated question it seems.' The simplest solution then is to start the beginning. "Start at the beginning."

"The beginning." Naruto sounded so cryptic. "When exactly is the beginning? Is it when the war started? When Sasuke started down the path that would lead to the destruction of Konoha?" Shikamaru was equally as interested as Shikaku as to where Naruto was planning on going. "To really understand what happened that led us here, we have to go back to the absolute very beginning. Before the time of the Rikudō Sennin before chakra even existed." Naruto paused expecting questions yet neither Nara seemed intent on interrupting him. Shikamaru didn't know this part of their journey and was immensely curious. "It all began when a woman fell from the sky." Naruto told them the story of Ōtsutsuki Kaguya and how she became the progenitor of chakra. Each piece of the story felt more fantastical and impossible then the last, but Naruto recounted every detail Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo, the Rikudō Sennin, gave to him. "The brothers eventually prevailed over their mother and sealed the Rabbit Goddess in the moon where Hamura would watch over her to prevent her escape. The Sage went on to have two sons. One inherited the Sage's natural skill and talent, and the other inherited the Sage's life force and vitality. The older talented son believed that the path to peace lay in conquest and struggle with the strong establishing a forced peace. The younger son valued cooperation and friendship. The Sage chose the younger son to be his successor greatly upsetting the eldest child." Naruto paused to catch his breath and unseal some water from his vest. "Each of these sons would go on to start families of their own the descendants of whom would give birth to two clans that would forever continue their ancestors' rivalry. Eventually the two families would be known as the Senju and the Uchiha."

"So, you're saying that chakra exists because this...woman, Kaguya, ate a fruit from a tree and absorbed its power, and that the Senju and Uchiha are the closest descendants of this woman left alive?" Shikaku was flabbergasted. This sounded more like myth and legend than an accurate accounting of history. 'Yet all myths and legends had to start somewhere.' Naruto nodded at Shikaku's rough summary of events. "How does this explain why you're here? And don't 'it's a complicated answer' me. Just get on with it." Shikaku was too busy making sense of everything to be brushed off.

Naruto laughed, "Well I don't think I need to explain the history of the two clans to you." A firm shake of the head no. "Good, but how about why Madara really left the village?" Another nod, this time saying 'yes.' "You see the Sage's eldest son, Indra, left behind a tablet for his descendants that had all the Sage's teachings and knowledge of their ocular prowess on it. It was this tablet that set the stage for the future to come. Unbeknownst to either brother at the time a third entity was born from Kaguya. It was the embodiment of her will and it still exists today. I don't know its true name, but it calls itself Zetsu."

"You mean that plant thing is as older than the Sage of Six Paths?!" Shikamaru knew that Zetsu was one of the principle instigators and silent manipulators of the war but he didn't know he was probably the most important player.

"Yes. Zetsu was the embodiment of Kaguya's will and is largely responsible for the conflict between the Uchiha and Senju clans and their progenitors. It was Zetsu who helped shape Indra's philosophy that strength was the ultimate means to peace. In reality this was a ruse to one day revive Kaguya. Sadly, Indra died before his plan could come to fruition, so he needed a way to manipulate another into reviving her. Thus, the tablet. It was created by the Sage and meant for his children, but Zetsu altered it so that eventually another would rise and be able to bring back Kaguya. However, an unexpected twist occurred that surprised Zetsu. Eventually he would find his pawn but imagine his surprise when he finds the exact same ocular prowess of Indra. Many Uchiha had awakened the Sharingan yet none had had this particular variant. I think you can guess the name of this Uchiha." Shikaku had an idea that it was Madara. "Unknown to Zetsu is that Madara was in reality the second incarnation of Indra, which is why he had the same Sharingan. But there was also a second incarnation of the Sage's second son, Asura." No mystery there. The rivalry between Senju Hashirama and Uchiha Madara was second to none even amongst the two rival clans. "Madara would suffer greatly during the Warring Clans Era, losing his parents and all of his younger siblings. The despair he felt awakened the Mangekyō Sharingan, the second stage of the Sharingan's evolution. Doing so enabled him to read more of Zetsu's altered tablet. This is where 'Project Tsuki no Me' was born. The tablet told of the ability to cast a genjutsu over the entire world using the moon to bring each person's idyllic fantasy to reality. It was this plan that brought Madara back into conflict with Hashirama after they had founded this village. Madara needed the bijū for his plan which Hashirama had distributed. Their conflict culminated at the Valley of the End where Madara *apparently* died."

Shikaku noticed how he stressed that word and concluded that that wasn't the whole story. "Hashirama had indeed defeated and severely weakened Madara but he survived the encounter. Eventually he encountered Zetsu who helped heal him and adapt Hashirama's cells to his own body by using the husk of the Divine Tree. Madara became the second person in history to awaken the Rinnegan, the third evolution of the Sharingan. However, he was very near death when fate dropped another pawn into his lap during the Third Great Shinobi War. This young Uchiha had perished on a mission that would proceed the Battle of Kannabi Bridge. Madara would nurse this wounded Uchiha back to life and manipulate events to make him want to believe in Project Tsuki no Me by engineering a situation where his best friend would kill his love interest. The plan ultimately worked and this Uchiha is currently the puppet master behind the puppet of Madara's grand plan and Madara is simply Zetsu's puppet for his own plan." It truly sounded like a confusing mess when he said it out loud. "And that brings us to why we're ultimately here. You see Madara needs all nine bijū for his plan, but there were three clans in history that were capable of restraining or controlling the bijū so first he had to eliminate them. How to do that? The first clan he targeted was the Uzumaki clan. Madara made himself the Sandaime Mizukage after the Nidaime died during the Second Great Shinobi War. Then he orchestrated a coordinated attack by Iwa and Kiri against the Uzumaki, Kumo got wind and sent a small force to aid them in their efforts. Many feared the Uzumaki clan for their fūinjutsu prowess, so they were all too willing to unite to destroy them. They succeeded at a heavy price of course which brought an end to the Second War."

Shikaku simply couldn't believe the story Naruto was telling. It all sounded too unreal. Yet he couldn't disprove it. That didn't mean he believed it, but he would keep an open mind

"This left two clans capable of interfering with his plan. Thankfully the Senju did a good enough job eliminating themselves during the Second War and now only Tsunade remains and she is far too old to birth a new generation of Senju. That left the Uchiha. Madara would die before he was in a position to move against them, but he had a pawn to do that for him. An opportunity presented itself for Madara's pawn to gain control over the most powerful of the bijū." Shikaku already didn't like the sound of that and was drawing his own conclusions. "The second jinchūriki of the Kyūbi no Kitsune was about to give birth and the seal would be extremely weakened during the process."

"He attacked your mother as she was giving birth to you and ripped the Kyūbi out of her?" Naruto smiled sadly as he watched Shikaku fill in the rest. "That helps answer some other questions. Not a lot is known about why the seal broke only that it did. It doesn't explain what happened to the Uchiha." Shikaku had a brief moment of realization, "Danzō?" Two nods were all he needed. "How? Why?"

"Danzō took the Nidaime's guarded attitude toward the Uchiha as proof that they couldn't be trusted, and he wanted the Sharingan for himself. The Kyūbi incident gave him an opportunity to turn the village against them. During the incident he had the other elders order the Police Force to protect the civilians which greatly reduced the number of their casualties. Then he spread rumors that the Kyūbi had been controlled by a Sharingan using his Root shinobi." It's ironic that Danzō was right. "Coupled with their fewer casualties it lent some credence to the opinion that the Uchiha were in on it. Then the Uchiha were forced to the outskirts of the village and they felt slighted. More and more the village was antagonistic toward them to the point they couldn't take it anymore. They began to plot a coup d'état."

Shikaku filled in the rest for himself. "Danzō used Itachi to kill off the Uchiha clan under the pretense of preventing a coup so he could harvest some of their Sharingan for himself."

"You're partially right. Itachi was the means with which the coup was to be averted however the Hokage only approved the assassination of the coup leaders and not the entire clan." Shikamaru had been in charge of thoroughly investigating the incident after the Godaime had heard Tobi's claim that the Uchiha were destroyed by order of the village. "Danzō wasn't satisfied with that so on the night Itachi would strike he sent his own forces to do it and kept the regular ANBU away from the distract."

Shikaku nodded. "I see."

Naruto cut back in, "Even so not even Danzō's forces could eliminate the entire clan without an alarm being raised but Madara's pawn intervened as well. He had a grudge against the Uchiha and the Village, so he attacked at the same time, also for the purpose of gathering Sharingan for the war to come."

"But with no evidence that anybody else was involved Itachi was blamed for everything." It was a horrifying revelation for Shikaku. His village had conspired against one of their clans to exterminate it. Even if it wasn't officially sanctioned there's no way the Hokage couldn't have known of the extent of Danzō's involvement.

Naruto nodded, "Not only did Itachi accept blame for his actions willingly he currently operates as a spy within the group that will bring about the Fourth Great Shinobi War. His good intentions aside Itachi is also why Sasuke destroys the leaf. On the night his clan was exterminated Itachi used his own Mangekyō Sharingan to torture Sasuke by making him experience the slaughter of his clan over and over again." Shikaku was both disgusted and confused by his actions. "His goal was to make Sasuke hate him in order to 'avenge' their clan and restore its honor. He never wanted Sasuke to know of the coup. A request the Sandaime and the rest of the elders were all too happy to honor. However, it was that decision coupled with Sasuke not knowing that made him so malleable for Madara's pawn. He manipulated the facts to paint Itachi as a tragic hero discarded by the leaf which is when Sasuke shifted his hatred of Itachi to the village after he realized that he killed his brother that loved him more than anything else in this world. Eventually he'd succeed which is why we're here."

Shikaku sat back and thought long and hard about everything he had just heard. It was crazy and impossible. Yet a part of him knew it was plausible and it helped answer a lot of questions that remained elusive. There were far too many knowledge gaps around the Uchiha and Kyūbi incidents that now make sense with this new information. 'Things seem so much more noticeable now that I have more context to frame them in.' The Uchiha massacre could have been avoided by one simple political move. "It's a shame Sandaime-sama didn't suggest to Fugaku that Itachi be the Godaime Hokage." Clearly the boy placed more priority on loyalty to the village than loyalty to his clan. It would have allayed concerns by the Uchiha that they were being marginalized and pushed out. The village as a whole might have had a problem with it, but this is a dictatorship not a democracy. "You've answered the why. Now the how."

Naruto pulled out a scroll and unraveled it. "This seal was designed to send our consciousness back. Well originally it was designed just for me." Naruto felt Shikamaru tighten his hold asking a multitude of questions that expressed his confusion. Naruto started talking to Shikamaru more than Shikaku, "I'm incredibly selfish, and I hated my life. So once the war ended I started working on a way to make my life better. As much as I love you and believe me I do! More than anything else in this world. I hated the rest of me and wanted to give myself a better life." Shikamaru kissed the top of his head understanding which made Naruto happy. "I'm sorry Shika. You deserve so much better than me. I was going to leave you and everybody else there and change everything for myself. At least that was my plan until Sasuke happened. After that I had to redesign the seal to work for Shikamaru and Shino. I wasn't about to leave them there with nothing. I had at least that decency."

Shikamaru bopped him over the head, "You're an idiot Naruto. Even if you don't think it, there's nobody better than you. At least not for me." He turned Naruto's head to the side to give him a chaste kiss on the lips. "Don't be sorry for wanting a better life. I'd have wanted you to do it." They started staring at each other expressing every feeling they felt for each other.

Shikaku cleared his throat drawing them back to reality. He had to chuckle as they both turned to him embarrassed at having had a moment in front of him. "I'm assuming I died, and either before or during the war, if this relationship is going on 7 years." Shikamaru nodded and Shikaku sighed as Naruto butted in that it was technically 9 years, it made his job even harder. It's one thing to let two kids have their fun together it was another entirely to let two adults continue a relationship that couldn't be. "Then I never explained to you the responsibility you had to the clan?"

Shikamaru shook his head, "You did. I was all set to be engaged to the Kazekage's sister, but then the war happened." Shikaku was surprised to hear that his son would be part of such a politically important union. "As it went on Naruto and I grew closer. I'm sure you remember many relationships that started on the battlefield and in camp." Shikaku nodded. "Once Naruto entered the war I was responsible for making sure that he didn't do anything stupid." He grunted as Naruto elbowed him in the stomach. "He was much more idealistic at the start, but we shared a tent so naturally we spent a lot of time together. I'm sure you can figure out how it all started then. In any case you died shortly before the war ended and kaa-chan was all too happy to let me and Naruto be together. Then before it became an issue with the clan Sasuke happened and well here we are. Plus, Naruto found a way around your problem, so you'll just have to back off oyaji. I'm going to be with Naruto whether you approve or not and am prepared to give up everything I am and have to do it if needs be." There was a seldom used tradition in the Nara clan where one could forsake their family or be cast out. The thought of Shikamaru doing that was not a pleasant one to Shikaku. "But like I said Naruto found a solution to your problem, so you don't have to worry."

"Do tell, what is this solution?" If he could keep his son happy and still fulfill the requirements for the clan he'd do it.

"At the same time, I was working on my time travel seal I was working on another, a back-up. In case I couldn't find a way to go back. This seal was meant to be a means in which two people of the same sex could still have a child together. At least in theory. I worked on it with baa-chan, Senju Tsunade, to create an artificial womb of sorts that was capable of facilitating a normal gestation." As normal as an artificial womb could be at least. "I was going to tell Shikamaru and Yoshino about it, but you already know how that turned out. Family was always important to me even though I never got to know mine. Shika became the most important part of my family and I selfishly wanted to keep him for myself. He told me about the conversation you had had with him years before which prompted me to start working on that seal. It *should* work but we never did get to test it. At least give us a chance to try it out before you decide anything." Naruto was looking at Shikaku with desperation written all over his face. "Shikamaru is the most important person to me, and I don't want to lose him."

Shikaku groaned and rubbed his temples. 'This is what I wanted to avoid by talking to Shikamaru about his responsibility to the clan. Deep rooted attachment.' Any number of childhood crushes and relationships exist between people, and they're just that a moment of fun in their childhood before they had any real responsibility or understood what their actions meant. "I don't really have a choice but to hope your seal works in the future. The last thing I want to do is lose my son forever." He tried so very hard to ignore the happiness and joy that appeared on both their faces before he steeled his emotions and looked at Shikamaru, "If it doesn't though. I have no choice Shikamaru." Shikamaru's eyes told him that he'd

follow through with his threat and walk away from his family forever if it came down to it. 'I really hope it doesn't. It would kill your mother.' Still it'd be better to know if it works sooner rather than later. "You both are still young," Meaning you may be 24 or 25-year-olds trapped in 12-year-old bodies, but you aren't having any children on my watch right now. A feeling he could tell they shared, "but have you considered testing the seal with somebody else to see if it'd work?" Arranged marriages took time to prepare and the sooner they start if it becomes necessary the better. Even if Shikamaru didn't follow through on the marriage he had to maintain the illusion for the rest of the clan that he was. 'I really hate politics.'

Naruto had thought about it but didn't feel comfortable about trying it without Tsunade or Shizune around. "I have, but it'd really be better if baa-chan and Shizune-nee were around. Even if they haven't done it yet they both helped design it and would be on hand if here was a problem."

There's no way Tsunade will return to the village anytime soon were the three simultaneous thoughts running through their heads. "We'll table that discussion for another time, quite frankly I need a drink and you two probably want food." Two nods and a rumbling stomach from Shikamaru soon followed at the thought of food. "Go wash up Shikamaru. Naruto and I will work on dinner." Seeing Naruto's perplexed look, "What? You help Yoshino cook." Naruto smirked thinking Shikaku just wanted less work to do, which he did, but he also wanted to get to know the real Naruto more. "And if you have any intention of being a part of my family I need to know more about my future son-in-law." That made Naruto smile and he bounced into the kitchen while Shikamaru groaned about parents being nosy.

Naruto and Shikaku spent an hour preparing food and chatting about Naruto's past life. It made him feel better about his own failings that the blonde had eventually found people who cared about him even if it took longer than this time around. Still he had to admonish himself for his faults and allowing Naruto to suffer for so long. Turns out Naruto is just as happy and bubbly as he used to be, he's just more guarded than before. 'Wars do that to people.' Thought Shikaku sadly. Shikamaru dragged himself back down once the food was set on the table, "What took you so long Shikamaru?"

A stiff yawn offered a guess, but no answer came. "Now that you know about us oyaji, and you seemingly believe us, there are things we need to discuss about what's to come."

Shikaku sat down, "I'm still on the fence about believing everything." Naruto and Shikamaru expected that. They wouldn't believe themselves either. "But if your knowledge can help than I'd be pretty stupid to ignore it."

It was the best they would get, and they knew it. "It's too late to change some stuff, but during the next chūnin exams hosted in Konoha Orochimaru will invade. His stated purpose is to destroy the village, but really the attack on the village is a smokescreen to get Sasuke." Like Danzō, Orochimaru wanted the Sharingan for himself. "He'll kill or has already killed and replaced the Kazekage with either himself or one of his spies to ensure Suna's cooperation during the invasion."

Shikaku wasn't as surprised at the potential betrayal of their ally as they might have thought he'd be. The signs are all there that Suna isn't fond of their alliance with Konoha. 'We take their jobs, and their daimyo cuts their funding. It was only a matter of time.' Orochimaru couldn't have picked a better time to make his move. "I'm guessing Orochimaru is in charge of this new Hidden Sound Village I've been hearing about lately?" Both of them nodded in his direction. "Then I'm guessing he needed a way to sneak some of his agents into the village legitimately. A shinobi village and the chūnin exams would do it. Konoha is always looking for new allies."

"Some of his agents are already here. We know who they are, but we can't take them out without threatening his plan." The three of them had already settled on letting Orochimaru's invasion happen the way he planned. His attack depended on surprise and keeping the Sandaime busy. "All his in-village agents will be in the exam and provide us a perfect smokescreen to remove them, and since we know the rest of his plan you'll be able to orchestrate a more effective counter than the one we had. We know you'd rather avoid the conflict entirely, but we can't risk it. The more we change the less reliable our information becomes, and we aren't yet ready to confront the Akatsuki, Zetsu, or their other pawns."

Shikaku agreed with their logic, assuming they were really from the future. He felt confident that they were, but he still needed more to be absolutely certain. Didn't mean he liked it. "Guess I don't really have a choice but to follow your lead." Unless he was willing to send them to Ibiki and have Inoichi poke around in their heads, and he wasn't fond of the idea. They all started eating at that point. Half way through the meal Shikaku couldn't help but ask, "What is your plan regarding Uchiha Sasuke?" He was after all the real reason why they all came back.

Naruto stopped eating both to think and respond, "I honestly don't know. It'd be even easier to kill him now than before." More information for Shikaku. He figured they fought with Sasuke, didn't think they'd kill him. "Shika and Shino point out that Sasuke is a product of a lot of manipulation and stupidity, and that there's a brief window of opportunity to stop him before it's too late. Sasuke dying might push Itachi even closer to Akatsuki than he already is." That would be bad. Itachi may be reporting on them to the Hokage but he did agree with their ideology. "Killing Orochimaru would certainly lessen the risk of Sasuke leaving, but unless Sasuke changes he'll turn out the same regardless."

"It sounds like you are in the best position to facilitate that change then." Shikaku intoned while Naruto frowned. Naruto wanted very little to do with Sasuke. "Who else will help him if not you?"

"I'll think about it." Naruto resumed eating in silence and said nothing more the entire meal.

Naruto woke up at 9 the next morning. He knew Kakashi wouldn't be there until 11 so there was no point in arriving at 5 like his teammates no doubt did and wait around tired and hungry. He climbed over Shikamaru to get out of bed, carefully avoiding falling on him so as to not wake him up. Shikamaru rolled over in his sleep and didn't even notice Naruto leaving. 'Must be really tired from whatever Asuma did to him.' Naruto got dressed and went downstairs to prepare breakfast for him and his teammates. They probably wouldn't take it, but Shikaku had been right. As much as he wanted to avoid Sasuke he didn't have much choice. He would at least try to make Sasuke a better person. Once he was done making breakfast he ate his own and made his way to training ground 3.

"You're late Naruto!" Sakura was once again angry and annoyed. Not only was their sensei late, but so was Naruto. She also hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday. 'I have to keep up with my diet to keep my figure for Sasuke-kun!' It didn't help her stomach deal with the lack of food any better. "Honestly, it's bad enough we have to deal with him you don't need to make it worse."

Naruto wasn't that concerned about his tardiness, "Is sensei here yet?" A shake of her head no. "Then as far as he's concerned I'm right on time, aren't I?" He unrolled a scroll and took out two bento boxes and handed them to his teammates. "Here. You two need to eat." There was no point asking if they had or not, he could hear Sakura's stomach rumbling.

"Baka. Sensei told us not to eat. Stop trying to get us in trouble." Sakura was trying hard not to give in and eat.

"No. If you had listened he *suggested* we don't eat. He didn't tell us not to. Its also idiotic not to eat breakfast." He pushed the boxes toward them again, "Eat." He sighed as they still refused to eat. 'Fine. Don't blame me when Kakashi shows up and hangs lunch over your heads during his test.'

Kakashi arrived precisely at 11. "Good morning!" He eye smiled at his students. He cringed as Sakura shouted about him being late. "Maa sorry. I got lost on the road of life." Kakashi noticed the two bento boxes as Sakura twitched in annoyance at his excuse. 'I wonder which one brought the food, but from the looks of it they didn't eat.' Kakashi pulled a timer from his utility pouch and set it on one of the wooden posts. "It's set for noon. Your test today is simple." Two bells appeared in his hands, "You just have to get these bells away from me. The person without a bell fails and gets sent back to the Academy for another year of training. Also, if none of you have a bell by noon then you'll be tied to those stumps behind you and watch as I eat my lunch in front of you." Two stomachs growled at the thought food. The two hungry ones glared at Naruto who wore an expression of 'I tried to tell you!' Kakashi set his lunch down on the ground before the memorial stone.

Sakura raised her hand, "Umm sensei?" Kakashi hmm'd. "There are only two bells."

Another eye smile from Kakashi, "You're right. This way at least one of you will be sent back to the Academy." This seemed to motivate two of his students, but not the third. "Come at with the intent to kill or you won't be able to get a bell." He assured Sakura that he'd be fine and that they wouldn't be able to seriously hurt him. Sasuke fumed at being underestimated, or what he thought was being underestimated. In truth Kakashi was just better. "Ready? Start!" Sasuke and Sakura moved to hide themselves while Naruto sat down under a nearby tree. "You know compared to the other two you're a bit...odd."

Naruto shrugged. "This test is about teamwork. Neither of them is going to be willing to work with me until after you've humiliated them. Be a good sensei and hop to it okay?"

Kakashi was confused. Nobody had ever done this to him before. "Don't you think you should tell them that?"

Naruto looked at him. "Don't you think it makes more sense to build teams that can actual get along rather than trying to force them to bond?" He took Kakashi's silence as a firm 'no.' "I'm working with them the only way that will be effective. Namely uniting them against you after you are disappointed by Sakura's lack of skill and humiliate Sasuke by point out he's not the best in the world. Until you do that I can do nothing other than sit here. Unless you're saying you want to see what I'm capable of, then I guess I can oblige you if you want." Naruto was standing now and waiting for a response from Kakashi.

"Maa perhaps after I test your teammates." Naruto was an unknown but had received high praise from the Hokage for his skills. Not knowing the full extent of his ability made a direct confrontation less desirable. He disappeared in a swirl of leaves and went off to find Sakura and Sasuke. 'They've hidden well...for genin at least.' He went after Sakura first who was running through the forest making more noise than an elephant looking for Sasuke. He created a **Kage Bunshin (Shadow Clone)** and sent it to into the clearing Sakura was running toward. It looked around as Sakura stopped and hoped she hadn't been noticed. "Sakura behind you." Kakashi whispered as he weaved a genjutsu around Sakura who was trying to turn around as quick as possible.

Sakura woke up alone and looked around frantically. 'Wha...what happened? Where did Kakashi-sensei go!' She freaked out at the thought Kakashi had gotten to Sasuke. 'Oh no! Not my Sasuke!' Just then she heard a rustling in the bushes and Sasuke call out to her. She spun around delighted at the prospect that her crush was looking for her. "SASUKE!" She stopped the second she saw him riddled with weapons and asking for help. She let out a piercing scream that scared the animals away from the area before she fainted.

"Maybe I over did it?" All Kakashi was thinking about was that Naruto was right. He was disappointed in Sakura's showing. Her files had indicated an aptitude for genjutsu and yet she succumb to the one they should have been using to train them how to stop and break genjutsu. Kakashi set out to find Sasuke next. Confident that he at least would have some skill, if unpolished. To his surprise Sasuke came to him.

Sasuke was smirking. "I'm not like those two idiots."

"Say that after you get a bell." So far Naruto was wrong. Sasuke was a disappointment. He reeked of arrogance and overconfidence which was not all that inspiring. He changed his tune a little when Sasuke executed a flawless **Katon: Gōkakyū no Jutsu (Fire Style: Great Fireball Technique)**. He would have been more impressed if it wasn't a technique that the Uchiha were known for. He substituted himself with his clone and then went underground as the clone switched with a log. Sasuke started looking around trying to find him. 'Why don't people ever look down?' His hand latched onto Sasuke's ankle. "Below you! **Doton: Shinjū Zanshu no Jutsu (Earth Style: Headhunter Jutsu)**." Sasuke screamed as he was pulled underground and Kakashi reappeared standing above him. "You're right you are different," he eye smiled, "but different doesn't always mean better!" He walked away intent on returning to Naruto.

Kakashi returned to where he left Naruto to see him still sitting under the tree. "So, was I right?" Kakashi frowned which Naruto somehow detected. "I see. Even if Sasuke had some skill you were still disappointed."

"I'm surprised you know anything about them, you seem to want nothing to do with them." Kakashi questioned.

"Wrong. I've only ever said they wouldn't work with me until after you deal with them. I have some of my clones talking to them right now. Which means," he stood back up, "its my turn now." He pulled out four kunai and threw them at Kakashi as he charged at him. Kakashi easily avoided Naruto's charge and forced his arms underneath his blonde student's armpits and lifted him off the ground. Naruto merely smirked, "You might want to let go of me sensei. I wouldn't want you to get hurt." Kakashi was about to comment that he could take it when Naruto's body started covering itself in lava. Kakashi jumped away surprised by the sudden appearance of the lava. He had heard of Naruto's Yōton, but he hadn't thought much of it at the time. "**Yōton: Shakugaikōken (Lava Style: Scorching Armored Fist)**. It's a useful ability ne? Makes touching me very difficult." He ran at Kakashi again who had to keep dodging away to avoid being hit. "Also makes avoiding my strikes harder."

Kakashi kept dodging his way toward the river. Once his feet landed on the surface of the water he formed the necessary hand seals for a Suiton jutsu. "**Suiton: Suidan no Jutsu (Water Style: Water Bullet Technique)**." The water sped toward Naruto and started cooling the lava. Given time it would eventual harden but he didn't plan on letting that happen. Naruto canceled his jutsu and dropped underground using the **Doton: Moguragakure no Jutsu (Earth Style: Hiding like a Mole Technique)** as the area got obscured by steam. When the steam cleared Kakashi couldn't see or sense his student. 'Interesting. No doubt if I touch the earth again he'll reappear.' Kakashi was basing his thoughts on fire and earth being necessary to create lava.

While Kakashi was planning his next move two of Naruto's clones were trying to convince them that they had to work together to have a chance at beating Kakashi. Neither Sasuke nor Sakura were particularly keen on working together, and neither believed that the test was focused on

teamwork. Sasuke because he felt teammates would only slow him down, and Sakura because Kakashi had told her it was about the bells. They both arrived near where Naruto was engaging Kakashi and observed the brief encounter as the clones continued to try and get them to cooperate. Finally, they resorted to manipulating them. The clone talking to Sasuke told him that Kakashi was a former ANBU captain and had joined the corps even younger than Itachi. The Naruto clone framed it that Sasuke would be an idiot not to do whatever it took to be his student. The idea that somebody was better than Itachi was enough to get Sasuke to grunt out an agreement to working together. The Sakura clone promised to give her and Sasuke a bell so as to not stand in the way of their love for each other. The two clones told Sasuke and Sakura a plan that might work to back Kakashi into a corner before dispelling themselves and alerting the original that it had secured their cooperation. 'Finally.' It was disappointing how easy it was to manipulate them both. 'Then again I do have 12 more years of experience than them both.'

Kakashi saw Naruto pop back up above ground. "You know the problem with standing on the water sensei?" Naruto smiled at him, "It doesn't work if your opponent can manipulate water as well! **Suiton: Daibakufu no Jutsu (Water Style: Giant Vortex Jutsu)!**" The water beneath Kakashi's feet started to swirl dangerously as Kakashi moved to get out of the way of raging current before it dragged him under.

Unfortunately, for him the water followed after him. Seeing no way to dodge the attack Kakashi decided to neutralize it, "**Doton: Doryūheki (Earth Style: Mud Wall).**" As soon as the wall finished forming Kakashi saw Sasuke sending another **Katon: Gōkakyū no Jutsu (Fire Style: Great Fireball Technique)** at him. Kakashi leapt into the air to avoid the fireball only to find a handful of shuriken flying toward him. 'It would seem Naruto was right again.' He pulled out a kunai and deflected the shuriken before hurling the kunai at Sakura. Naruto and Sasuke was running toward Kakashi and both of them focused on him as soon as he landed. 'They're both quite skilled with taijutsu that's a relief.' Naruto focused on taking out Kakashi's legs while Sasuke targeted his head and neck. Had Kakashi not been holding back they might actually have been able to kill him, as it was he played along and allowed them to guide him toward the forest. 'No doubt Sakura is lying in wait to snatch the bells.' Before he had the chance to find out the bell sounded signaling the end of the test. "Well. That's unfortunate isn't it?" All of his genin glared at him. It warmed his heart to see them bonding! He led them all over to the posts. "None of you got a bell, so you know what that means right?" He was far too chipper and excited for their taste. His joy turned to shock as there was a puff of smoke at his waist where the bells used to be hanging.

Naruto pulled out two bells from his utility pouch. "You mean these bells sensei?"

"Yes. Those bells." Naruto was only close enough to have a chance at getting the bells twice. Kakashi had watched for any sign that they might be missing but not one of his students had touched the bells during the test. 'Then how did he have them?' "Well you have the bells Naruto so who is going back to the Academy?"

Naruto pretended to think about who he'd give the bell to before tossing them both to his teammates, "There now all of us have had a bell. You never said we all had to have a bell at the same time. None of us fail."

Kakashi wasn't happy about it but Naruto was right. He at least understood the point of the test even if the other two still didn't. "Ordinarily I'd agree with you Naruto, but your teammates still haven't grasped the true purpose of this test so I'm afraid you all fail anyway." Sakura and Sasuke looked confused. "Come on surely the two best students in the Academy could figure this out since the worst one did." Still nothing. "It's so basic!" Frustrated at their lack of ability to connect the dots or remember what their teammate told them. "Ugh. It's teamwork!"

"Huh? Teamwork. You mean working together?" Kakashi nodded. Sakura was confused. If the point was to work as a team why was there only one bell? "But sensei there were only two bells. By only having two it created conflict within the team."

"Yes. That was the point. To see if any of you would be capable of putting the mission before yourself. Only one of you was willing to do that." His teammates glared at Naruto as if it was his fault. 'They still don't get it.' Sakura and Sasuke were beginning to frustrate Kakashi. "That's alright though. I've decided that none of you will go back to the Academy." Sakura relaxed at that and started cheering that she passed. "Yes. Instead I've decided that all of you should be dropped from the program altogether!" Sasuke growled out and tried to rush Kakashi who easily flipped him over and sat on him. Kakashi held his head down with his foot while putting a kunai to his throat.

Sakura was indignant, "HEY YOU CAN'T DO THAT TO SASUKE-KUN!"

Kakashi's heated glare instantly cowed her. "I can do whatever I want. I'm the one in charge here! None of you are worthy of being shinobi." Sasuke started struggling more so Kakashi applied more pressure. "Sakura! You were only concerned with running after Sasuke. Naruto! You knew the true purpose of this test and decided not to tell your teammates. And Sasuke. You thought the others were so far beneath you that they weren't even worth the time. The *arrogance!*" Kakashi valued teamwork above all else and they would learn that or die. "Shinobi accomplish missions in teams that's why you three were put together! For example, Sakura! Kill Naruto now or Sasuke will die." Sakura panicked at the threat, but Naruto wasn't concerned at all. Kakashi removed the kunai and got off Sasuke. "Or at least that's what would happen if this was an actual mission. One of you gets captured and the next thing you know your entire team is at risk." He walked over to the polished obsidian rock. "Do you know what this is?" Not getting an answer, "This is the memorial for every shinobi that has been killed in the line of duty. The names of my best friends and sensei are carved into it. Those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash." He got lost in thought for a few minutes reflecting on his own failures at helping to put their names there. "I'm going to give you each one more chance." He tied Naruto to one of the stumps. "Naruto doesn't get to eat since he failed the most out of all of you. We'll resume in 15 minutes." He disappeared into the bush to see if they were listening to anything he said.

Naruto was angry. 'I failed the most?! I tried to tell them everything at the beginning well before this stupid test even started! They chose not to listen! How can I be blamed for their failings!' Naruto was grinding his teeth when Sasuke shoved his lunch in his face and told him to eat. Sakura did the same after Sasuke explained that he'd be useless if he didn't eat. 'How the hell is that any different from what I told you two morons this morning?!' Nevertheless, he accepted the offered food if only to appease Kakashi who was watching.

Kakashi appeared standing over all of them with storm clouds gathering behind him, "YOU!" Sakura and Sasuke started to panic, "So you two decided to break the rules then? I hope your prepared to face the consequences!"

Sasuke growled, "We're a team. You want to punish one of us you punish all of us." Sakura agreed with Sasuke.

"All of you are a team then is that it?" Three nodding heads. "All of you...!" Kakashi really loved building dramatic tension. "Pass." As he said that the storm clouds that had gathered immediately dispersed and were replaced with a bright sunshine and happily chirping birds.

Sakura recovered first, "Wha...what?"

"You pass." Kakashi backed away. "You're the first team to do so. Everyone else always did exactly what I said and fell for every trap. Congratulations we are now officially Team 7." Sakura cheered while Sasuke allowed a small smile. "Meet here tomorrow morning at 0700 for

training." Two of his genin nodded and started walking away. That left him and Naruto alone, and Naruto in a position he couldn't escape. "So, when did you really get the bells?"

Naruto shrugged as best he could, "I broke into your house last night and stole them." Kakashi didn't like hearing that somebody knew where he lived and was capable of breaking in and sneaking out without him knowing. "It seemed fair since you broke into mine and all. Before you ask how I knew to steal them in the first place, I've seen you administer your test before. You really need to change it up sometimes sensei. As for how I knew where you lived. Well I'm good at knowing things I'm not supposed to." He spit out a small drop of lava to start eating away at his bindings.

"Don't break into my home again, Naruto." Naruto gave him a look saying 'Really?'

"Take your own advice before you start lecturing me sensei. You aren't the only one to have been traumatized." The ropes were weakened enough for him to break free. "At least you have a place you can go to feel safe. There's nowhere safe for me. Not in this hellhole of a village." His wrists were still bound so he spit out another globule of lava and started trying to pull his wrists apart.

Kakashi tried to reassure that he wasn't going to hurt him, "I had and have no intention of hurting you Naruto."

Naruto was rubbing his wrists now that his bindings were gone, "Why the hell should I believe you? Mizuki told me the same thing, as did countless others. The only time people in this village are ever nice to me is when they plan on hurting me." There were a few exceptions, but they were the definite minority. Even though most people left him alone now it was far from perfect. Kakashi seemed taken aback at his bluntness and distrust for him. "There are less than 10 people in this village I feel I can trust not to hurt me. Neither you nor the Hokage are one of those 10." Kakashi actually looked hurt at that. "Don't get me wrong I still love the Hokage. He was one of the few who ever tried to help me," All Kakashi heard was how he didn't help him. "even if he failed to do as much as he could have. He, like you, and my sorry excuse for a godfather all feel the same thing. It's just easier not to be near me. All of you look at me and see my father. So, its easier to keep me at arm's length and ignore everything that's wrong with my life."

"How do you know about your father?" Kakashi, like the Hokage, figured Naruto knew about his father but they didn't know who had been telling Naruto all of these things.

"The Kyūbi told me." Kakashi tackled Naruto and cut through his clothes so he could start looking over the seal to see if anything had changed. "The seal hasn't changed, and yes I should know I see it every god damn day of my life. I think I'd be the first to notice if there was a problem with it."

Kakashi still looked, but the seal was lightyears beyond what he was capable of. As far as he could tell it was still the same. "You can't trust the Kyūbi Naruto. It will only try to manipulate you."

Naruto snorted. "So, I should trust a man whose been lying to me my entire life? I made my peace with the fact that he'd probably never tell me of the Kyūbi or my parents long ago. But he isn't exactly a shining example of someone to trust. I'm sure if he could he'd think about resealing the Kyūbi into someone else after you give your report later. If there were any other Uzumaki around he'd probably try to do it. Unfortunately, there aren't."

"The Hokage wouldn't casually throw your life away like that Naruto." Kakashi got off Naruto and helped him up. "He's done what he has to protect you."

"Wouldn't he? What's one life, possibly influenced by one of the most destructive and malevolent forces in the world, compared to an entire village?" It was simple math for a Kage. One life versus many. The many would always win. "As for protecting me, if you gave my picture to anybody in Iwa or Kumo they'd know who my father was instantly. You know it, I know it, and he knows it. I'll follow the Hokage's orders and continue to love him like my grandfather. But trusting him is impossible so long as he's Hokage."

"And me?" Kakashi hoped that Naruto would be able to trust him in the future.

"You, like everyone else, will have to earn my trust. You're not doing well so far." Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets and looked down at his ruined clothes. "It's a good thing I have more clothes in this life." He left Kakashi alone in the training ground as he went home. "See you tomorrow sensei."

Kakashi left to give his report to the Hokage. It'd take longer than he thought it would.

Another chapter done. I'm sure some people won't like that Kakashi's test is the same, but I really couldn't think of another way to do it. Kakashi for all his faults prides himself on his teamwork. It's the most important thing to him. So, I left it the same with a similar play through. It's boring and unoriginal but its what I went with. But at last we're back to being shinobi and we can actually get started with the story!

See you next time!

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

A/N: Not much to say at the moment

One Autumn Leaf: Wow what a wonderful surprise to find in the midst of a shitty week for me! Glad you're enjoying the story and don't think I'm completely off my rocker (I totally am but shhhh!). I felt the same way about Kakashi's test. He is just so much of a teamwork person that there's no real other way to do it where it's still somewhat Kakashi. My take on Kakashi has always been that teamwork to him is a round hole and his genin are always a square peg. So, he'll just chip enough of them away to shove them through that round hole. I know I'm doing OOC with the characters, like a lot, but they still retain a good portion of their personality/original behaviors or have justifications for their deviations that may or may not have been revealed yet. Naruto's relationship with Hiruzen is my favorite part to write. There's no doubt Naruto loved the man more than anything but how could he possibly ignore everything the man didn't do because he was Hokage? You can love somebody and still not trust them. As for wave I still haven't decided, and I really need to...its coming up fast. I too feel like wave has been done so much mainly because Zabuza and Haku are fan favorites. So, the part of me that's a writer is like "eh it's been done so many times," but the part of me that's a fan is going "but Zabuza and Haku are really cool!" There are a lot of things that you can do with the Wave arc and I have some ideas I'm leaning towards, but I'm still not committed.

Can you believe Kishimoto still hasn't given me ownership of any part of Naruto?

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Chapter 7 – Training yeah!

Kakashi was meandering through the village after dismissing his genin and for once he wasn't reading his little orange book. Right now, he was trying to find a way to tell the Hokage that Naruto trusted the Kyūbi far more than he trusted 99% of the village. It was a terrifying and sad revelation that Naruto trusted the being largely responsible for everything wrong with his life. 'That's not really true I suppose. Sensei was a genius and wouldn't have made a seal that couldn't do its job. No, it's the village's fault for this situation. I only hope they haven't created their worst nightmare.' It was hardly a secret that almost everybody hated Naruto and took delight in punishing the 'demon'. It still baffled Kakashi why they would attack Naruto if they truly believed he was the Kyūbi. In his mind it made more sense to light a match after dousing oneself in oil. The end result was the same, an agonizing death.

Thinking of Naruto always made Kakashi feel guilty. 'I should have been there for him. Orders be damned.' For all his talk of never abandoning a comrade, Kakashi had a habit of doing so when excuses were conveniently available. He can truthfully say that he was ordered by the Hokage not to associate with Naruto, but it didn't lessen his guilt. Had things played out differently Naruto would have been his little brother. 'He should have been my little brother,' thought Kakashi remorsefully, 'It seems I can do nothing but continuously screw up.' As bad as Kakashi felt he still had some relief that he at least was not in any way obligated to care for Naruto. Yes, Kakashi looked at Minato as a father, but that's hardly unique. Most genin develop a quasi-parental relationship with their jōnin-sensei. He certainly wasn't Naruto's godfather or anything. 'I feel bad for Jiraiya-sama. It was always his intention to train Naruto but I'm not so sure he'll do so willingly now.'

Seeing that he had slowly meandered his way toward the Hokage tower, Kakashi pulled out the latest Icha Icha novel and put it in front of his face. It wouldn't do for people to see that there was a problem. He was once again late for a meeting. The meeting for all the new potential jōnin-sensei was supposed to be held at noon. Which is exactly why Kakashi didn't bother to administer his test until today. Walking into the tower he ignored everybody who gave him looks of disgust at reading what many considered pornography in public and made his way upstairs. Not bothering to stop by the secretary Kakashi opened the door and stuck his head in, "I'm not late, am I?" He smirked when he saw most everybody sweat drop at his question. Despite how well known he was he was still relatively unknown by most.

The Hokage merely sighed in irritation, "Just get in here Kakashi, you've kept us waiting long enough." Kakashi fully stepped through the door without an ounce of shame at being the reason this meeting was running so late. The Hokage waited until Kakashi moved to his place in the line and did his best to overlook one of his most skilled jōnin's behavior. It was hard to do when everybody was trying to stab Kakashi with their eyes at making them wait three hours for him to show up. Worse still he kept his book in front of his face, "Put the book away Kakashi or I'll burn it."

Kakashi took threats to his book seriously and quickly put it away, "I can't believe you would threaten such works of art Hokage-sama." It was a semi-known secret that the Hokage was an avid fan of Icha Icha as well. Still the Hokage merely rolled his eyes at Kakashi who hastened his way across the room to his spot.

"Now that we're all here we can begin. We'll start with the sensei of the new teams." He motioned for the new jōnin-sensei to move forward and listened as they made their reports. A nameless chūnin was responsible for taking the minutes of this meeting and it was he who would handle the questions. At least until the Hokage dismissed everyone else and called the new sensei one by one to deliver their report. It was important to keep abreast of the up and coming shinobi.

"Team one."

"Pass."

"Team four."

"Pass...barely."

"Team five."

"You're joking right? Fail."

"Team seven."

"Pass."

That simple word had caused a great albeit subdued commotion in the office. Hatake Kakashi had been given another genin team. And he passed them. The Hokage had everyone quiet down so they could continue.

"Team eight."

"Pass."

"Lastly, team ten."

"Pass."

Knowing that five of the six teams passed made the Hokage jubilant. The council though significantly weaker and now less annoying were still complaining about all the changes he was making. This would shut them up. Almost all of the teams had passed this year as opposed to almost all the teams failing. "It's always a delight to hear such wonderful news about our village's newest shinobi. Genma since your team is the only one to fail you are dismissed." The senbon chewing man bowed and walked out of the office. "The rest of you will stay. I wish to hear a more detailed report of how your students performed. Now I shall hear from the reserve program." The Hokage had forced some of his jōnin without teams to start investing time and effort into the genin that often failed their test. They were resistant at first and there had yet to be any significant improvements in the reserve corps, but Hiruzen had hope that eventually it would bear fruit. He listened as the remaining 15 jōnin in the room gave their reports. Four additional teams would be formed with genin from the reserve program. It wasn't the results he wanted but he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. "Very well. Those of you that will not be taking on teams of your own are dismissed."

Quietly the eleven remaining jōnin bowed and left the office. "Now then I wish to hear a more detailed report of how your genin preformed." This was always a necessary step although in the past it was often a pointless exercise. The point behind it was to identify gaps in the Academy training that would be plugged. Now that the shinobi were once again in charge of the curriculum this exercise was no longer useless. The teams that failed would also be reported on for the same reason but the Hokage didn't want oral reports on those teams. He listened as each gave their report on their teams. Most of the jōnin still admonished that they had a lot of work to do with their genin but at the very least they had a decent starting point. 'Still this group will not have the advantages of the new program so its still excellent news that so many passed.' He dismissed each jōnin after their report. Kakashi would have been the next one to go had said jōnin not insisted that Kurenai and Asuma go before him. They both looked at him oddly while the Hokage agreed and asked Kurenai to give her report. "So Kurenai what is your evaluation of your genin?"

Kurenai stepped forward from the others, "As expected Hokage-sama they all have great potential and its just a matter of getting them to draw on that potential. Kiba is of course very confident in his abilities and is indeed one of the more skilled graduates from his class in terms of taijutsu, however his confidence often borders on arrogance. He also has a pathological need to assert himself as an alpha as is typical of members of his clan. It will take some time to beat into him that on this team I am the alpha." Kurenai didn't much like the way Kiba behaved but would not fault him for it. It was her job after all to mold her students into exceptional shinobi. "From the little I have observed of him his first instinct is often to charge head first into a problem, which isn't necessarily a bad thing but like with most aspects of shinobi life it's a thin line that is walked." Her favorite student was Hinata, but she was also the most problematic one as much as she hated to admit that, "Hinata...while she does have tremendous potential I'm afraid that she isn't going to survive in this line of work." It pained Kurenai to say that about a girl she has long since looked at as a daughter. "Her family has utterly destroyed any confidence in her own abilities, even so she is still quite skilled. I am hopeful that now that she is my student I can introduce her into some other fields that the Hyūga don't traditionally go into." It was the one beneficial thing her family had given her. "At the moment she is still recovering from a..." she glanced over at Kakashi as she thought of one of his students, "personal problem. It is effecting her whether she knows it or not." Kakashi wondered why she looked at him when talking of this problem. "Right now, her real problem as I mentioned is her lack of self confidence and her unwillingness to hurt anything. However, if I am unable to bring her out of her shell there is always Anko." Anko was always a drastic option for dealing with young kunoichi. "Lastly, Shino. He's unusual...even by Aburame standards. Surprisingly outgoing and vocal for his clan's reputation. Willing to alter his own behavior in favor of establishing a functional rapport with his team. He is easily the most skilled of all my students and well aware of his own limitations." She had tested all of their abilities after her little tracking test to see where they stood. She was satisfied for the most part, but Shino had been the most well-rounded individual. "It seems he is willing to push himself beyond what his clan teaches him and is very open to criticism and advice."

"I see. It would seem his relationship with young Naruto is bearing fruit." That two prominent clan heirs were associating willingly with Naruto was well known now even if most chose to believe there was a hidden agenda to doing so.

Kurenai was concerned at another of her students having a relationship with Naruto. Not because he was dangerous but because he was responsible for Hinata's sudden regression several years ago. The thought of it made Kurenai sigh, "I was hoping that the rumors of their closeness was exaggerated but I can see now that it isn't." At seeing both Kakashi's and the Hokage's questioning face she continued, "For years Hinata had been using Naruto as a model to follow and imitate. She was enamored with his confidence and will despite everything that was thrown at him." It went unsaid this was both figurative and literal. "At least until a few years ago. Hinata had developed quite the little crush on the boy and had taken to..." She didn't want to say 'stalk' even though that is what it was, "following him most days. I believe she was trying to work up the nerve to say 'hello' to him but she never did. Naruto confronted her after his hospitalization." Kurenai had been angry at the way Naruto handled Hinata's feelings but mostly because Hinata had been hurt. She was appreciative that he was at least honest. "In doing so Naruto revealed that he could never be with Hinata and it nearly destroyed her worse than anything her family ever did."

Kakashi was curious as to why Naruto wouldn't want to be with such a kind girl, there were after all few in the village who liked him. "Why exactly couldn't he be with her?"

Kurenai was at a loss at what to do right now. Really, she shouldn't say anything. It was Naruto's secret, 'At least I think it's a secret.' He should be the one to control when such knowledge became public. She had admonished Hinata for revealing it to her after doing her best to help the poor girl recover. Most shinobi had no problems with such relationships but that didn't mean everybody was as accepting. Not knowing the opinions of those in the room Kurenai decided not to tell them exactly why. "I'm not at liberty to say. That's between Hinata and Naruto. Really, I shouldn't even know but Hinata had nobody else to confide in with her problem. It's nothing dangerous Hokage-sama just a private affair." The Hokage seemed to accept that, but she could tell Kakashi did not.

"Very well then Kurenai. I expect great things from your team and you. Do not disappoint me." Kurenai bowed and assured the Hokage that she would not fail him. "If there is nothing else you are dismissed."

Kurenai was about to leave before Kakashi spoke up, "Actually Hokage-sama I believe she should stay until after my report." Kakashi wanted to know more about Naruto and knew there were very few people the blonde child trusted and if Shino was one of those people it would be important to have their teams interact as much as possible. At hearing there was very little tying him to the village Kakashi was concerned that he had two students who would potentially leave the village. He refused to allow that to happen.

"I take it you still want to deliver yours last Kakashi?" Hiruzen may have an idea what Kakashi is up to but the man was difficult to read. It's why he was so valuable as a shinobi, he gave nothing away. Seeing Kakashi nod Hiruzen turned toward his distant son, "Well then Asuma tell us of your students."

Confused at the situation Asuma just shrugged and began his report. "As expected they all work well together. I decided to forego the traditional teamwork test it really seemed irrelevant at the time. Instead I started attacking them at low chūnin ability. Ino and Chōji reacted as I expected them to, namely that they didn't react to my sudden attack." It was still disappointing that they weren't on guard for potential attacks just because they were in the village. "Shikamaru however seemed prepared for me." That made him smile. "Surprisingly the laziest member of my team is the most motivated and skilled one of the three. Its quite the confusing paradox. On the one hand he is exceptionally lazy, but he is also driven to be the best he absolutely can be. Like Kurenai he seems to have a close relationship with Naruto, going so far as to say that one of things he likes is Naruto despite also saying that he disliked loud people and 'troublesome blondes.'" The room was equally as confused by that as he was when he first heard it. It was no secret that Naruto was always troublesome even if he had stopped his massive amounts of pranks. "In terms of ability he's the best of the three. It was really surprising. Naras are not known for their skills in taijutsu and yet he was quite adept at the art and definitely had the best endurance. He's not overconfident, if anything I think he underestimates himself all the time. Chōji is the second best of my students. He has his flaws don't get me wrong. Like Shikamaru he is equally as lazy but decidedly less motivated unless Shikamaru is encouraging him or telling him to do something." Yesterday had shown Asuma that despite what Ino may have wanted Shikamaru was going to be the leader of their little group. "I'd have to say that Chōji is a lot like Hinata in that he doesn't want to hurt people. During my little test he inadvertently struck Ino with his attack and the look on his face at the realization that he was about to hurt one of his friends was very telling. He has skill no doubt about that, but confidence and a back bone are lacking. Ino," he sighed as he thought about his last student, "She was by far the biggest disappointment. I had really expected better of a kunoichi from a clan like the Yamanaka. She has no endurance, no drive other than to get with Sasuke, and handles criticism about as well as a moth handles a flame when it flies too close." He rubbed his head at the thought of her. "She's very much a spoiled princess and a fangirl and will require the most work to even get her to start realizing she's not as great as she thinks she is. I'll make it work but I'm going to be having a chat with Inoichi about her."

"Well then Kakashi I assume you want Asuma to stay as well?" Another nod from the cyclops. By now Hiruzen knew what Kakashi was after. Information about Naruto. Kurenai's and Asuma's teams presented him the best opportunity short of the boy himself, "Feel free to keep us in suspense Kakashi."

Kakashi looked at his colleagues who were both staring at him before looking at the Hokage, "Well I'll keep the evaluation of the first two brief. Sakura is pretty much exactly like Ino minus the limited skill Ino possess." That was quite the statement as far as Asuma was concerned. Ino had performed so poorly he had to wonder if things at the Academy had changed at all. Ino at least had the benefit of belonging to a shinobi clan. "Sasuke is...nothing short of a disaster. The boy is arrogant beyond belief and feels entitled to everything simply because he is an Uchiha. He seems to have adopted that aspect of his family well. He is quite skilled for a fresh genin, but his overconfidence and arrogance are bound to spell trouble especially now that he'll be around Naruto all the time." Kakashi could already tell that Sasuke has both a superiority and inferiority complex, on top of his pathological need to be on top. "Why you allowed him to live in the home where his family was slaughtered I'll never know. As far as I can tell he was never forced to go to therapy to deal with the trauma he suffered. Every time it was brought up somebody was always there to conveniently 'save' him from it." The Hokage was genuinely surprised to hear that the boy had not gotten the help he needed. "As it is now Sasuke would abandon this village at the first offer of power if he thought he'd be able to kill Itachi with it." No surprise to anybody in the room there. The Uchiha's self-proclaimed quest to avenge his clan was well known. "That just leaves Naruto. He's definitely the most troublesome of my new students. The boy is talented and possess an intelligence hitherto unseen in this village in decades. Perhaps even surpassing his father, whom he is aware of Hokage-sama." That news did not make the Hokage any happier. "Though I have not seen much of his combat abilities what little I have seen would put him at average chūnin easily, and I don't believe I or anyone has seen half of what he's capable of. As far as I can tell he is shockingly skillful in the use of his kekkai genkai being able to shroud his body in a cloak of lava. Truly impressive. It makes him near impossible to engage in taijutsu." Naruto was hardly the untalented shinobi every report ever made him out to be. 'Then again most of those reports were written by a traitor.' People would forever look over that fact when examining said reports. "His ability in fūinjutsu itself is astounding as you are aware Hokage-sama if the seals around his apartment are any indication. However, it's the seals inside the apartment that are really telling." That piqued the aged Kage's interest. He was well aware of the seals meant to protect and keep people out of the boy's residence but wasn't aware there were any inside. "The seals inside are far more lethal than anything on the outside. The level of fear and distrust he feels to go so far in his own home speaks volumes of his state of mind." Nobody in the room should have been as surprised as they were at hearing that. Yet they were. "Sasuke might abandon the village in pursuit of power, but Naruto might abandon it out of fear. There's nothing to indicate he even lives in his apartment. No clothes, no personal possessions, what food was there is non-perishable and easily transportable."

The Hokage rubbed his temples in exasperation. Not even his trusty pipe was easing his over-burdened mind. "Have you any theory on where Naruto has learned all he has Kakashi?" It was only the first day and slim chance in there being any theory, but Naruto was frustrating to the point of madness.

"Well..." Kakashi was hesitant to bring it up knowing it would only cause more problems for everyone. "I have only a theory on where and how he obtained his skills but if Naruto is believed I know who told him of his father." Kakashi was silently asking if the Hokage truly wanted to know the answer and doing his best to convey he would not be pleased. He wasn't surprised to get a 'yes' to his silent question. Kakashi sighed, "If Naruto is to be believed it was the Kyūbi that told him of his father, and its possibly the Kyūbi that has been training him." He wasn't surprised to see the Hokage's head slam onto the desk and an exhausted groan escape his lips. "I'm afraid it gets worse Hokage-sama." He ignored the 'how could it possibly be worse' from the Hokage. "It would seem Naruto trusts the Kyūbi more than you, and everyone else." Kurenai and Asuma were flabbergasted at that implication while the Hokage started banging his head on his desk in frustration.

Still groaning Hiruzen took a break from banging his head on his desk. "Why, pray tell, does Naruto trust the Kyūbi more than everyone?"

"He implied that unlike the rest of us Kyūbi has not lied to him." Kakashi was trying to remain serious in the wake of the Hokage grumbling about how he's too old to deal with this shit.

"Fix it Kakashi. And don't screw this up." The Hokage never regretted his decisions more than he did at this moment. "You will not be late. You will

not waste their time. You will make them all outstanding shinobi that are loyal to this village." He leveled a glare at Kakashi that dared him to defy his orders and promised painful humiliation if he did. The Hokage made one last decision that would really force the cycloptic jōnin's hand. "You will start training yourself again Kakashi. I am old. Too old. If I cannot have one of my students succeed me then it will be you!" Kakashi was the only option at this point. "The next chūnin exams are in a couple months. You have that long to prepare your students and yourself. If Jiraiya or Tsunade have not returned to assume this post, then it will be you." Hiruzen would still try to get one of his students to do it but he was skeptical. "Cat." The masked ANBU dropped down before the Hokage. "Send a message to Jiraiya that he is to return immediately or find himself a missing-nin. Send the same to Tsunade and stress that if she doesn't not only will she be a missing-nin so will her apprentice. Lastly, send messages to every money lender in the Land of Fire: Tsunade is persona non-grata in their presence until further notice. It's time my students be reminded I am not the kind grandfather that trained them." Cat bowed and disappeared as he left to send the Hokage's messages. Hiruzen turned back toward Kakashi. "Six months Kakashi. Do not waste them for your students or yourself."

Kakashi sighed, he *really* didn't want to be Hokage. It would cause too much disruption to his carefully organized life. He knew his carefree lateness could only be able to last for so long. 'At least I got nearly a decade out of it.' He turned to Kurenai and Asuma who were both still staring in a mix of confusion and awe. "Since my most troublesome student seems to have close ties to two of yours perhaps we can meet up for some joint training sessions?" He looked directly at Kurenai as he thought of his pink haired student, "It would also help Sakura and Ino if they saw an actual Kunoichi and perhaps they in turn could help Hinata with her confidence issues." Regardless of what anybody said the two fangirls were confident...even if said confidence was woefully inaccurate and misplaced. "As for Sasuke...he needs several humbling experiences." Itachi had needed the same when he joined ANBU under Kakashi. While Itachi was certainly a very respectful individual even he succumbed to the constant praise that he was superior. It was inevitable really. Tell a child that they're the greatest thing since sliced bread everyday of their life and eventually they believe it. Kakashi sighed again dreading his last idea, "I'll even have to organize sessions with...Gai." Kakashi respected Gai and the man was probably his only true friend. Sure, everybody was nice to him and respected his opinion but Gai was the only one to call Kakashi on his bull shit and mean it. 'Why does he have to be so eccentric though?'

Asuma liked the idea, "Joint sessions are fine. Honestly, I was never really a fan of the 4-man cell structure for genin. Yeah, it's great for more experienced shinobi but its hardly the most beneficial for developing shinobi. Take the three of us. Kurenai is clearly the most capable of anybody in the village when it comes to genjutsu. Kakashi, by virtue of the Sharingan, is a ninjutsu expert. I specialize in close quarters combat. Our students could learn much more from the three of us than one of us alone." It was one of Asuma's ideas that he was reluctant to bring up to his father for the simple fact they didn't get along. "You should consider altering the way genin teams are structured Hokage-sama. Had our teams been one team of nine genin with three jōnin to supervise their training it allows for more flexibility in both missions and training." Ino-Shika-Cho was an exceptional capture and interrogation team, but how the hell would they find them? Thrown in an Inuzuka with a nose for tracking and now we're getting somewhere. The same could be said for Kurenai's team. Great at tracking, piss poor at anything else. Most tracking missions devolve into combat scenarios, but her team lacks any kind of direct combat-oriented shinobi and her team is too stacked in terms of taijutsu. Kakashi's team however is meant to be an assault team with varying degrees of capability, if trained properly. "It would maintain the 4-man cell for mission operations but provide more well-rounded training to the younger generation."

Hiruzen agreed that it was worth considering, but it would be difficult to implement. People were far too rooted in tradition to accept changes in anything. 'Especially if it comes from the Shodai or Nidaime Hokage.' Still the logic could not be denied. "An interesting thought Asuma. I cannot implement it as policy for asinine reasons that need not be explained." Asuma was lightly crestfallen at his idea being rejected. "However, if three of my jōnin decided to undertake joint training sessions and swap their genin around for the purposes of creating a well-rounded shinobi who am I to interfere in their decisions regarding their students? So long as their training doesn't suffer I see no reason to interfere if such a thing were to occur." Hiruzen smiled inside as he saw his son perk up that his suggestion wasn't outright rejected. "It would certainly help justify a trial if there was a standard to compare it to."

Kakashi liked the idea. "I'm game to try it if Kurenai is."

Kurenai didn't much appreciate being put on the spot as everybody was looking at her now. The part of her that wanted the best for her students was ready to dive in, but the part of her that was determined to prove all those nay-sayers that she was too young and inexperienced to be a jōnin-sensei was determined to prove them wrong. In the end if she really wanted to be an exceptional sensei she would have to put her students first. The opinion of others matters little, and the results will speak for themselves. "Very well. When should we start?"

Asuma lit a cigarette much to Kurenai's annoyance, "As soon as possible. If Kakashi is going to be the Godaime," Which got a pout from Kakashi as Asuma snickered at his fate not envying the silver haired cyclops, "We have a lot of work to do, and I for one want this to work. It'd be better for the future of the village if our genin were well rounded before becoming chūnin instead of having highly specialized recruits."

Asuma missed his father's look of pride as he spoke. 'You're already acting to protect the king if only you would realize that Asuma.' Their discussion of the king was the reason behind their distant relationship. Asuma did and said things that showed he knew the answer he just refused to think outside the box.

"Then let's start tomorrow. Training Ground 3 at say 0900?" Asuma and Kurenai were looking at Kakashi with skepticism. The Hokage may have ordered Kakashi not to be late but they'd sooner believe Orochimaru was secretly a loyal shinobi who was framed for the crimes he was accused of than Kakashi being on time. "Come on guys I won't be late." The room remained unconvinced. 'Am I really that bad?'

"Yes, you are that bad taicho." Kakashi looked up at Cat who had returned to his place in the rafters.

"Maa Maa." He started waving his hand at them trying to dismiss their worries and skepticism, "I won't be late. As much as I don't want to be Hokage I have my orders and all of you should know I've never gone against them." Which wasn't true, there were many times Kakashi interpreted orders to suit his needs. "Well at least not the more serious ones."

"Fine, but why Training Ground 3?" Asuma asked, seemingly satisfied that Kakashi would be serious. It was rarely actually used for training instead meant more as a place of quiet and respectful reflection for those who have died.

"These kids need a reality check. They've signed up for a life of hardship and death. The memorial stone is a wonderful reminder that people die everyday in our line of work...and I have a small history lesson planned to really drive the point home." Kakashi said with just a hint of regret in his voice at what he planned to do. "Anyway, we should get out of the Hokage's hair and plan what we'll do tomorrow with our cute little genin!" He eye-smiled at his two colleagues. "Shall we?" He turned and walked out of the room followed by the two other jōnin. They would spend the rest of the day planning what they would do tomorrow before coming up with a comprehensive plan.

With the room empty the Hokage went back to 'work.' Opening the top drawer of his desk he pulled out a little orange book and started reading. His laughs and giggles would make the ANBU sweat drop as they watched their Hokage read his porn while his shadow clones did paperwork.

Meanwhile...

Naruto was wandering back toward the Nara compound after Kakashi had dismissed them. He was still frustrated at his once again sensei. 'Seems its my lot in life to be the one who takes the blame for everything regardless of circumstances.' He had tried to get Sakura and Sasuke to work as a team before the test. They refused. So of course, it's still Naruto's fault. Naruto was certain had he outright told them that the purpose of the test was to work as a team Kakashi still would have blamed him for not giving them the opportunity to discover that. 'There's just no winning with him.'

People still glared and whispered about Naruto as he passed by. Naruto didn't care. He stopped caring about what people thought long ago. His pathological need for attention after his neglectful childhood had subsided after he joined Team 7 the first time. 'Sasuke was good for one thing at least.' It certainly was irritating having to play an idiot for years the first time around. Granted he was by no means a genius but he was hardly stupid. Stupidity just meant people had to spend more time explaining things to him. In other words, more attention. For a child deprived of any kind of attention even being thought of as an idiot was preferable so long as people had to pay attention to him.

He walked back into the compound and waved at the Naras that waved at him. It still felt a little weird to be around the friendly clan of deer loving lazy cloud watchers. A good weird, but still weird. Walking up to his home, also still weird, he wasn't surprised to see Shikamaru and Shikaku playing shogi. "Hey Shika." He glanced at the board, "How's the losing going?" He laughed as Shikamaru pouted. Most couldn't notice when the Nara pouted, but he could. The way his eyes would sharpen the tiniest bit, his shoulders jerk just a bit higher, and his fingers relax their loose hold even more to the point he'd nearly drop the piece he was moving. Most would mistake it for anger or frustration, but Naruto knew it was Shikamaru's way of pouting. It was adorable. Much like he found Konohamaru's anger adorable when he called him 'Little Monkey' in front of his friends. Speaking of he'd have to do that again real soon.

"You're welcome to take my spot Naruto." Shikamaru conceded the game not wanting to lose worse than he already has. "I'm sure oyaji would love the chance to humiliate you again."

Naruto shrugged noncommittally. "I think I've had my fill of shogi with Shikaku-san for a while. The last one turned into an interrogation after all." He didn't mean it in a malicious way. Shikaku just preferred to figure people out over a game of shogi. "How was Asuma today?"

Shikamaru started resetting the board as Naruto sat down next to him. "We didn't do much. Just a bunch of physical exercises to make Chōji faster, me stronger, and Ino...not suck?" There really wasn't another way to describe it. "She didn't like it though and man was she loud. I'm glad you stopped being as loud as you used to be Ruto."

Naruto huffed indignantly at being loud. It was hard to ignore a loud child which was why he did it in the first place. "Where is Chōji anyway? I thought for sure you'd be hanging out with him. You haven't done it in a while know that I think about it."

Shikamaru shrugged as he moved a pawn forward. "He said his dad was going to show him something today. Think it's one of their clan jutsu or something. How was your test?"

Shikaku was quietly listening to the two boys talk as he and Shikamaru began a new game. He still wasn't quite sure whether or not to believe they were who they said they were. It was hard to accept that the three were from the future. Harder still to accept what they were telling him if past events. He definitely accepted that his son and Naruto had a deeper relationship than he thought, but he was still skeptical that it would end poorly for everyone involved.

"Kakashi blamed me for my teammates inability to work together...again." It still annoyed Naruto that the man was so frustrating. "I did *try* to make them work together before the test but they (Sasuke) brushed me off. We passed in the end, although it was pointless Kakashi wouldn't have been allowed to fail Sasuke anyway. Politics and all that." He had no doubt his team was structured the way it was originally because it would appear to the council that Kakashi was trying to do what they wanted to. Namely teach Sasuke everything while ignoring the other two. Sakura was only there to be Sasuke's wife so there was no need to teach her anything. Naruto got tired of watching the two geniuses play their favorite game, so he pulled out his fūinjutsu kit and went back to working on his own **Hiraishin (Flying Thunder God)** seal.

Shikamaru snorted as Naruto's focus immediately left his surroundings. "Oyaji was the Yondaime as bad as Naruto?"

"Worse." The quick and deadpanned reply was unexpected.

Shikamaru shook his head as he kept moving pieces to his father's tune, "Troublesome idiot." He said it with so much fondness it was impossible to ignore. "He just can't help himself. I had to dress him once you know? He got so focused on the damn seal that he started walking out of the house when I told him we had to go." Shikamaru couldn't help but laugh. It was quite the sight for their many friends. "Imagine the Rokudaime Hokage walking through the village working on a seal in nothing but his boxers as I tried to throw some clothes on him."

Shikaku had to reevaluate his earlier statement at learning that. "Perhaps Naruto is worse then. Minato never did anything like that...at least that I know of. It's hard to say for certain. Naruto get like this a lot then?"

"Yeah. Especially when he's trying to recreate his father's jutsu. It's the one thing he's never been able to do." As Shikamaru finished a loud groan and a cry of 'no' came from the focused blonde. "What's wrong Ruto?"

Naruto kept chanting 'no' over and over again. "It's horrible Shika...my dad! He was such a...such a...NERD!" He was going over the differences between the Nidaime's and the Yondaime's versions of the **Hiraishin** when he made two startling discoveries. The first was pretty cool but the second was devastating. "The yellow flash people saw when he used it..." He really didn't want to reveal what he was about to and tarnish the image of his hero. "It wasn't originally part of the jutsu from what I can tell. That means my dad added it to the matrix! He *wanted* there to be a flash of light." Naruto groaned at the horrifying thought at what his dad had done. "On the bright side I figured out why there have only been two people who have been able to use the **Hiraishin**. I wonder how bad my dad was hurt when he tried it. Ne, ne, Shikaku-san was my dad ever in the hospital for a really long time?"

Shikaku thought back to the early days before they were thrown into the deep end of the Third War. "Yes, once. I never found out what happened, and Minato refused to talk about it but he was in the hospital for about 3 months. If Tsunade hadn't been around I was told he would have died."

Naruto hrmphed. "Of course. The idiot tried to use the Nidaime's version of the **Hiraishin**. It would've torn him apart." Seeing Shikaku looking at him with a questioning gaze he continued, "It has to be designed to work for each person individually. While they can take anyone they want by

touching them if somebody tried to use the Nidaime's or the Yondaime's seal it would kill them. I myself tried to use it once and Kyūbi had to regenerate several of my organs, and that was the milder reaction from the stories I've heard of people who tried to use one." The Yondaime had thrown so many of his kunai and he didn't recover all of them so endless copies of the seal existed in the world. The people who tried to recreate the jutsu did not fare well. Usually disappearing and reappearing in a pile of goo and gore, if they were lucky.

"Why was your reaction 'mild' when you used it if others have died trying?" Shikaku knew that many had tried and failed to learn the famed jutsu of the Yondaime Hokage and all had failed.

Naruto smiled at the man. "I'm his son. At the very least of me a part of me is capable of using the seal without problem. It's always been a theory of mine that relatives can force the jutsu and make it work. Such actions always have a price of course."

Shikaku while interested in the topic was immediately focused on a different part of Naruto's statement. That part being 'relatives.' He was trying desperately to remember when and how Minato first got his hand on the **Hiraishin** that was created by the Nidaime and constantly coming up blank. Though the man was a genius and it wasn't an impossible idea that he came up with it out of the blue, it made much more sense that he tried the jutsu once but found the results less than desirable. If Naruto's theory was accurate and Minato had tried to use the Nidaime's jutsu and ended up in the hospital...it was a troublesome thought. "You think your father tried to use the Nidaime's formula?" A single nod. Wasn't a lot known about Minato's family. Growing up an orphan in a village as large as Konoha would do that to a lot of people. Nobody could even be certain he was born in this village. It was war and many people end up displaced. The Nidaime didn't have any children of his own, 'That we know of at least.' It wasn't unheard of for Senju to have blonde hair, one need only look at Tsunade to know that. So, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility, but hardly a certainty. Shikaku had a lot more to think about again and was quickly growing to agree with his son that all blondes were troublesome and not just specific ones. "How exactly do you know what the Nidaime's formula looks like anyway Naruto?"

Naruto started rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, "Well...when Mizuki had me steal the scroll I may have...made a copy?" The look of exasperation and slight humor from Shikaku was surprisingly comforting to Naruto. "Most of the 'forbidden techniques' are only forbidden because they take huge amounts of chakra. Something I have in spades." Shikaku was still looking at him only now there was a hint of warning. "It'll be fine Shikaku-san." The sigh was one of resignation and disbelief not of acceptance. "Ne, Shika wanna go watch clouds?"

Shikamaru shrugged and conceded the game again as he stood up. "Be back in time for dinner. Your mother will kill me if you're late." Shikamaru looked at his dad questioning how she would when she isn't here. "Do you really think your mother won't know if you're on time for dinner just because she isn't here?" Yoshino seemed to have a sixth sense for when her men were being lazy. That fact made Shikamaru shiver and Shikaku chuckle. He watched as Naruto grabbed his son's hand and started dragging him away from the house chattering about where to go. As troublesome as Naruto could and was being Shikaku liked the kid.

After leaving the Hokage's office the three jōnin made their way to one of the more popular shinobi-oriented bars. Seeing as it was barely evening it was fairly empty which suited one of the jōnin just fine. They took one of the tables in the corner after getting some drinks. A habitual action born from wanting fewer avenues of attack. Walls offered security even if it was temporary when it came to shinobi. "What should our game plan be if we're going to do this?" The question was accompanied by a cloud of smoke as Asuma chose to do both at once.

"Well unlike you two I have a new job to train for." The tone of Kakashi's voice left little to the imagination. He was angry and annoyed at the prospect. "Whatever we end up training the genin in I'll be right there alongside them doing it. I propose we take a page from ANBU in terms of physical training and knock it down a bit, so they can survive." A bit meant a lot for some of their students. One couldn't argue with training results and the ANBU had the best standards nowadays. It wasn't always the case but with the way things have gone most other shinobi have stagnated, himself included.

Kurenai didn't want to push them too hard but neither did she want to be soft. "Can't say I'm familiar with ANBU training standards. So long as it doesn't kill them I am willing to try." She downed a cup of her favorite sake in one go. "We shouldn't get too ahead of ourselves. Tomorrow will have to be spent gauging where they are development wise." The benefit of three teachers would mean that they could work the genin in different areas and not have to divide their attention as much if they were alone.

Before anybody could say anything else a loud voice permeated the bar. "MY ETERNAL RIVAL I HAVE BEEN LOOKING EVERYWHERE FOR YOU!" Much to Kakashi's shock a green spandex clad man with bowl cut hair that shined most unnaturally ran over to him. Kakashi still hasn't figured out how Gai always found him. "Come! It's time for us to fan our flames of youth with another youthful challenge! The current record is 45-46 with myself in the lead which mean its your turn to choose our youthful bout!" Gai started going through various stretches while asking what Kakashi was going to pick. The green spandex did not help anybody in the least when Gai started stretching. Nobody could deny that Gai didn't cut an impressive figure even if it was covered in a hideous green outfit.

"Hmm. Did you say something Gai?" Kakashi smiled as Gai instantly deflated and started grumbling about his hip cool attitude. Their friendship was odd but Gai was Kakashi's closest friend, 'and probably my best friend.' Not that he'd ever tell the man that. There was simply no need. "I'd love to fan our flames of youth as you say Gai," the man's eyes started sparkling with excitement, "but I can't right now," and the once excited man was instantly crestfallen, "We have to plan what we're going to do with our cute little students tomorrow."

"YOSH!" The speed at which Gai bounces between emotional states was truly impressive and terrifying. "Already planning training sessions with other jōnin. Truly you wish to fan the flames of your student's youth to incredibly heights my eternal rival! Please allow me and my team to join you in such a youthful endeavor!"

It was exactly what Kakashi wanted to have happen, so he nodded in agreement. An act that made Gai pump his fist in victory with a cry of 'YOUTH!'. Gai was a world renown taijutsu master. Nobody else could claim to possess an iota of the talent he has. Kurenai and Asuma however didn't want to subject their students to Gai...at least not this early. There was simply too much...Gai when the man was around. Kurenai knocked back another cup of sake while Asuma lit another cigarette. "Can you at least tone down the exuberance for a day Gai? I don't want to traumatize my students on their third day of being a shinobi." Asuma liked Gai, respected him, but his quirks were trying on the mind most of the time.

"Whatever do you mean my youthful colleague?!" Gai asked in his usual youthful manner.

It made Asuma groan at the volume of Gai's youth. "That Gai. That is what I mean. Look we all know how youthful you are. Just asking if you can tone down the shouts of youth with our students until they get to know you better."

Kurenai was still processing that Asuma wanted to subject their students to Gai so soon. Gai was an acquired taste and very few ever developed it.

She didn't particularly know Gai that well. They ran in different circles and Kurenai was never interested in taijutsu beyond what was necessary for her to advance through the ranks. Seeing as the other two had already made it clear they wanted Gai she wouldn't be the one to ruin things. "I think some of my students could do with a small dose of 'youth' as you put it Gai-san." She had no idea what she was saying but hoped it was enough to convince the man that she wanted him there.

Tears threatened to spill from Gai's eyes at what he took as a wondrous expression of a budding flame of youth. He would have continued his display but two of his colleagues have made clear they want smaller flames. They will not be any less dim in his mind. Just more controlled. "Very well then my students and I will join you and yours tomorrow. I shall do as you ask and *try* to control my youthful vigor, however one of my students has fully adopted the Springtime of his Youth and I cannot guarantee he will not make up for my lack of youthful displays."

Kakashi's eye was bugging out of his head, "There's two of you!?" He had never actually met Gai's team as he spent a lot of time avoiding the other jōnin as much as he could.

Gai smiled and laughed before pulling out a photo of his team. "Yes! Lee," he pointed at an equally green spandex clad boy with the same hairstyle despite it not being necessary, "is my most precious student. Though I treat all my students equally, Lee is by far my hardest worker. Going so far as to join me in my morning training. He constantly stokes his youthful flames higher and higher. The other two are less youthful but still youthful all the same." He put the photo away. All everyone, except Kakashi, was thinking was where the hell Gai kept anything in his spandex outfit. It didn't have pockets so how the hell does he carry anything with him? Kakashi was too busy freaking out. The imagine of a mini-Gai had been burned into his brain and he couldn't help but be horrified at the thought of two Gais running around the village.

"Gai joining us tomorrow takes a load off our shoulders. I hope you won't mind if I ask you to come up with a training program for my students? Nothing on your level by any means just something to push them harder than they might be willing to go by themselves." Gai nodded toward Asuma before they spent the next few hours coming up with some semblance of a plan. They would all evaluate the genin together before separating them into groups to start them off where they needed the most help. Kakashi and Asuma practically knew that Ino and Sakura would be with Gai. Their physical capabilities were the weakest of everybody in the group of that they had no doubt. As much as Gai wanted Neji to learn something besides the Jūken his family is known for he knew the boy would refuse and likely spend the day by himself working alone. TenTen would work with Asuma as the only other dedicated weapon user in the group. Lee would work with Kurenai to at least get better at detecting and dispelling genjutsu. The other students would be split later and if necessary they'd change what they were focusing on. Like all plans nothing survives the first encounter.

The next day...

Each of the genin had been told to meet at Training Ground 3 at 0900. They had all received notice independently of each other and so had no idea that they'd be undertaking a joint training session. Imagine Shikamaru's surprise when he walks into the training ground and sees four jōnin there waiting for their students. "Kakashi-sensei you're here...and *early*?" Kakashi was never on time for anything short of an A-rank mission. So, the idea that he was not only on time but early was horrifying. "Is the village under attack or something? I'm sure you'd find a way to be late to your own funeral." The rest of the jōnin laughed as they agreed with Shikamaru that Kakashi would likely find a way to do something so impossible.

"Maa. Sometimes I'm on time." Kakashi's dry response was met with an equally dry stare from Shikamaru. The rest of the genin were arriving as it got closer to the appointed meeting time. All except one. "Where is my little ball of sunshine?"

Shikamaru was stifling a yawn. "Probably still sleeping. We were well aware of your reputation for lateness, so Naruto probably didn't bother to get up yet." He was still sleeping when Shikamaru got up to make breakfast before coming here. No guarantee that Naruto was still asleep, but he probably wouldn't show up until noon.

"I can't believe one of my cute little students would be so unprofessional as to arrive late." 5 pairs of eyes turned toward Kakashi in a mixture of disbelief, confusion, and a look of 'are you serious right now?' Looks Kakashi promptly ignored. "Well I guess I better go retrieve my wayward student."

Shikamaru watched as Kakashi started leaving to get Naruto only he was going the wrong way. The man didn't seem to be in a rush to get Naruto. "You're going the wrong way sensei."

Kakashi turned around. "Oh? I could have sworn Naruto's apartment was this way." He pointed over his shoulder in the general direction of where he knew Naruto lived.

"If Naruto still lived there you'd be right. I thought you would have noticed during your little break-in that he doesn't live there anymore." Shikamaru still couldn't understand how nobody had realized Naruto moved in with the Naras. Sure, Naruto sent a shadow clone to his apartment every day, but it didn't take a genius to notice Naruto and Shikamaru walking into the clan district everyday and Naruto never leaving it.

"Where does my cute little student live then?" Kakashi had never considered the possibility that Naruto would live somewhere else. In fact, aside from the emptiness of the apartment everything else suggested he still lived there. 'I suppose if he lives somewhere else he'd want to maintain the illusion of still living there so as to not be harassed in his new home.'

Shikamaru made a motion for Kakashi to follow him before turning to Shino, "Depending on his state Shino I might need your help." Shino nodded and started following along with Kakashi. The rest of the jōnin and genin were curious as to what was going on. As much as the genin wanted to follow them the jōnin started them on some stretches.

Kakashi pulled out his trusty orange book and held it in front of his face as Shikamaru led him in the direction of his home. "So how long has Naruto not lived in his apartment?"

Shikamaru just shrugged, "Since he got out of the hospital after *that* incident. We're all really surprised nobody realized what with the amount of time Naruto and I spend together." Nothing else was said as they walked into the Nara compound and toward the main house. There was no question as to what the incident was. Kakashi saluted Shikaku as was befitting his position before following Shikamaru and Shino into the house and up the stairs. "Ruto you awake yet?" Shikamaru called once he reached the top floor and got no response. Opening the door to his bedroom he saw that it was empty. "Definitely up then." Kakashi was digesting everything that this little sojourn was revealing about three of the genin he was now partially responsible for. Walking right across the hall to the other room Shikamaru didn't bother at all with knocking and just opened the door before letting out an audible sigh. Curious as to why he would Kakashi poked his head around the corner and saw Naruto furiously crumpling a piece of paper and throwing it into an overflowing waste basket before starting another one. "Oh man, not again. Shino would you mind making

this idiot some breakfast while I get him ready?" Another nod and the bug user left. Presumably to go to the kitchen and find something edible. "Hey Ruto." Silence. "RUTO!" More silence followed by a frustrated groan.

Kakashi watched amused as Shikamaru made his way over to the working blonde and guided him out of the chair. All the while grumbling about how he was stuck dressing the blonde again. With practiced ease Shikamaru started putting clothes on Naruto. 'Just how many times have you had to dress him like this?' Kakashi's thoughts were focused on that as he watched Shikamaru guide one leg and then the other into the pantlegs before pulling them up. A shirt was added in a similar manner. Kakashi was surprised as Naruto completely ignored when his writing hand was seized and simply switched to his other one. Eyes only momentarily breaking contact with the scroll in front of him as the shirt was pulled over his head. "Is Naruto always like this when he's focused?"

"No, only when it's fūinjutsu does he get like this. There's no point breaking the spell until we get back to the others. Naruto will pretty much function on autopilot. It'll be the easiest way to get him there and have him fed." Shikamaru never looked toward Kakashi as he continued to dress his blonde. The last few articles to make it onto the blonde were his vest, not unlike Kakashi's only a different color, and two hitai-ate. One around his neck and one around his forehead. Shikamaru crawled in the small space between Naruto and the desk and in one fluid motion picked up the blonde and put him on his back as Naruto grabbed a firmer hold on the scroll in hand and kept writing. "Come on. We'll put his sandals on as we walk."

Kakashi looked around the room that looked much more lived in than the boy's apartment. Several plans were clustered by the window. Clothes were strewn about the floor. A semi-filled row of bookshelves lined one of the other walls. Skimming over some of the titles Kakashi was surprised to see a diversity of topics. Most dealt with shinobi skills while others dealt with history, politics, financing, and a slew of other topics. Kakashi was thoroughly impressed at what Shikamaru had accomplished and followed him down the stairs where they reencountered Shino who had a pair of sandals and some fruit in his hands. "I have a proper lunch packed away in a scroll for him." Shikamaru nodded his head as he took the apple from Shino and just held it up to Naruto who promptly started eating it. Shino meanwhile just shook his head and quickly slipped Naruto's sandals onto his feet. "Shall we depart?"

As they walked Kakashi was determined to sate some of his curiosity, "Why did you check your room first if Naruto has his own?"

Another shrug from Shikamaru, "He sleeps with me most nights." Seeing a gaze that was not satisfied at that he sighed before hitching Naruto up a bit higher on his back. "Naruto says I keep the nightmares away." Not entirely untrue but also not completely truthful. For as long as they've been together Naruto has just enjoyed falling asleep to the sound of Shikamaru's beating heart. At first it was a constant reminder that they were still alive, and now it's still that but Naruto also finds the steady rhythm soothing. Kakashi didn't need to know that last bit though.

"I see." Shifting his attention to Shino, "What's your role in Naruto's life?"

"I am perhaps the one person in the village who understands Naruto-san. Why you may ask? My clan has always been looked at in a way that is not always favorable because of our kikaichū. In this Naruto-san and I are similar. However, I could never begin to comprehend the depths of his suffering because of his status. I shall be the best friend I possibly can be so that he knows he is not suffering alone." It still hurt Shino to think that Naruto had been through so much for something beyond his control and not once did he ever break. Not until the very end. Shino doubted anybody else could have taken so much. "Naruto-san is a truly remarkable individual. A word of warning Kakashi-sensei, if you ever try to take one of us from Naruto or manipulate him you will see something you will wish you had not."

Now Kakashi was really curious, "Oh?"

It was Shikamaru who answered not Shino. "Naruto isn't as naïve as most people would like to believe. Nor is he stupid. He knows he'll probably never gain acceptance here, but he also knows the village will never let him go. He's too valuable a political asset, the son of the Yondaime Hokage and the jinchūriki of the Kyūbi. No Naruto can never leave even if he wanted to." Shikamaru actually sounded sad at that. Naruto once confided in him how the village always felt more like a prison to him than a home. "It doesn't mean he'll take anything from anybody anymore. Once not long ago a man tried to take away what little Naruto had. To keep a long story short Naruto ripped out the man's heart and crushed it. He is dangerous, as are all shinobi. You won't find any trace of that man anymore so don't bother."

That was news to Kakashi. He wasn't too concerned about somebody dying for trying to hurt his sensei's son, but it did present other potential problems. "Is Naruto loyal to the village?"

Shikamaru and Shino thought long and hard. Naruto was loyal to the village not too long ago, but he had clawed his way up to that point. *This* village was still the one that treated him like crap and they weren't sure where Naruto really fell on the topic. They shared a look before Shikamaru sighed, "We don't know. We do know he's loyal and protective of us. So long as we're here he'll stay. Should we die before the idiots in this village learn to deal with their pain in a way that doesn't torture an innocent child...who knows. He'll never attack it though on that we are certain." Not that either of them planned on dying anytime soon, but life as a shinobi was dangerous. Nothing was ever certain.

Kakashi withdrew back into himself to digest everything he had learned. He would have to inform the Hokage that Naruto wasn't as much of a flight risk as he first thought, but he needed to be handled with care. 'Sensei why did you ask your son's status to be revealed?' Had they been able to keep quiet about the new jinchūriki things might have been different. Sadly, it was no longer a secret. "And we're back." Kakashi saw the rest of the genin running through some warm up exercises. Ino and Sakura appeared to be panting quite heavily which was not encouraging. 'We couldn't have been gone for more than half an hour.' He turned back to Shikamaru who was in the process of setting Naruto on the ground. "What do you plan on doing about him now?" Kakashi watched as Shikamaru grabbed hold of the scroll and in the briefest moment when Naruto lifted his brush off of it he yanked it out of his grip. Kakashi chuckled, "Ah. Simple, yet effective."

Naruto meanwhile shouted indignantly at Shikamaru, "HEY!" He finally saw that he was no longer in his room, "Woah! When did I get here?" He briefly panicked as he thought he might not be dressed before he looked down and sagged with relief at not seeing his boxers. "Damn it...I really need help with that Shika!" The fact that in this case was not being oblivious to his surroundings. Naruto saw Kakashi, "Woah Kakashi-sensei you're not late!?"

"Nope!" He eye-smiled at his blonde student, "In fact you were the only one who was late today Naruto. Looks like you three won't have time to limber up before we get started." Kakashi walked back over to the other jōnin who were in the midst of talking about what they were seeing.

"-lieve it. It's only been fifteen minutes and already they're about to collapse." Asuma was blowing smoke out of his mouth.

Gai was nodding in agreement, "It is most unyouthful to see such potential wasted."

Kakashi walked up with his trademark, "Yo! I see you're thinking the same as me." Three nods. Ino and Sakura needed so much help physically it was frightening. "Well Gai as much as I'd like to say that physical conditioning is your expertise unfortunately I really think they need a woman's touch right now," he looked at Kurenai, "specifically a Kunoichi's touch."

Kurenai nodded, "That will have to wait until late though. Sadly, we'll have to give them a moment to rest if we want them to even be marginally decent with today's training." It was a shame that they'd have to tone down the morning's exercises to accommodate two students. She yelled out, "That's enough all of you come sit in front of us while we explain why you're here." Ino and Sakura collapsed in relief while the rest sat patiently with the exception of two who looked annoyed at even being here. "Now then no doubt you twelve are wondering why you're here with all of us."

Seven firm nods, two tired nods, one shy nod, and two 'death' glares were the response. Asuma blew a large cloud of smoke toward the resting genin. He just couldn't help but be slightly annoying with the habit. "You're here because three of us have decided that you all would each benefit from training with all of us as opposed to just one of us. Gai is here because we value his expertise on taijutsu and physical conditioning. It's his decision whether or not he and his students return in the future, but you nine" he looked at each of the genin in question, "will be spending the foreseeable future with each other. You will train together and undertake missions together. Not necessarily in the team you were assigned to."

Seeing that they had even their two most frustrating students Kakashi picked up where Asuma left off. "Each mission has a different set of requirements and sometimes it will make more sense for I or one of the other jōnin to lead it. For example, if it's a tracking mission I am far better at it than Kurenai here." Before any of the genin could insinuate that any of the jōnin were lacking in a particular area he continued, "Make no mistake each of us have our positions for a reason. We all specialize in different fields and we are all capable of leading any mission. We simply have different skillsets that would benefit you during your training."

"You will all learn from each of us, sometimes as a group sometimes individually it depends on the situation. Gai is here today because at the very least we will get a daily training regimen that you will follow to the letter." Kurenai turned to look at Ino and Sakura even though she was addressing the group, "He will also tell you what you will be eating from now on to ensure that your body gets what it needs to develop properly." Ino and Sakura would have protested that they have to follow their diets had they not been so tired. "There's no need to be overly concerned about the amount of food you'll be eating. So long as you stick to the program he outlines for you, you will remain in peak physical condition."

Kakashi cut back in. "Each of you has chosen the path of the shinobi though I feel some of you don't understand what exactly that entails." He walked to the stone standing behind and rested his hand on top of it. "This stone bears the name of each shinobi that has given their life in service to this village. The names of everyone I ever loved are inscribed upon its face at some point or another." He paused to give himself a moment. "Yet despite how we remember their sacrifice, our village is the only one who remembers." He turned to address all of the genin. "The world has been through three Great Shinobi Wars since the founding of the hidden villages, and yet nobody outside those who are familiar with shinobi has even been aware that two more wars happened beyond the first. Can you imagine that? Each of the lives on that stone was given to protect the people of this nation and yet very few are even aware of their painful sacrifice. That is the life you have chosen. To live, fight, and die in the shadows to protect your home. The stories of honor and glory that you've heard are nothing but lies. Good publicity for us as it attracts work but we do not exist in the light. We lie. We cheat. We steal. We stab in the back. We slit throats in the dark of night. We arrive silently and leave before anybody knows we were even there. That is what it means to be a shinobi. That is what we will be teaching you. If you have any delusions that we are here to service your own selfish desires we aren't. We are here to turn you into exemplary leaf shinobi." Most of the genin looked thoughtful at his words but he could tell some had ignored him. "No matter. They'll learn the hard way then."

Gai moved to the front of the group. "Yosh! Now then to begin we must figure out where each of you are individually. So, everybody up!" The ten genin who weren't already standing stood, "First up we shall be running laps around the training ground. I want each of you to set a pace your comfortable with. This is not about being the fastest or the first one around. This is about establishing a pace you could run for hours in other words measuring your endurance. We shall run for one hour. Let's go!" Gai took off running followed immediately by Lee. The other genin followed behind. The remaining jōnin waited until the genin were all moving before they too took off at a run. Part of making this effective would be showing that even though they are their superiors they too undergo the same training they will.

Neji and Sasuke ignored Gai's statement and took off full sprint around the training ground. They were obviously racing each other. Gai shook his head and motioned for nobody to correct them. They had to learn on their own. When the two in question stopped too tired from their run not even 15 minutes in, "Did I not say we were running for an hour?" Neji knew the tone in his sensei's voice told him to get back to it. Sasuke however looked ready to argue and just as he opened his mouth he was cut off, "Save your excuse for somebody who cares. I told you we would be running for an hour. It's on you to figure out the pace you can run for that long. Now get back in line." Gai took off leaving Sasuke stunned. Nobody had ever spoken to him that way and he was at a loss of what to do. He started running again, but because he was tired from his little sprint earlier he had one of the slowest paces. It was a blow to his pride to know that Chōji was running at a more constant pace than him.

As the hour came to a close Gai yelled out for all to hear, "Yosh! Finish the lap you are on and then take a short rest. Be sure you stretch to avoid muscle cramps."

The jōnin stood and watched as the genin began to go through their stretches. It wasn't necessary for them to do so. Today's activity did not affect them that much and their undertaking of the exercises was more for solidarity than actual training. They all watched as Chōji struggled with one of the stretches because of his weight. "I can't do it." Chōji was upset that he was unable to do it on his own. They also watched as Shino, Naruto, and Shikamaru moved to help him. Naruto and Shikamaru grabbed one of Chōji's arms while Shino placed his hands on the boy's shoulders. They slowly helped Chōji stretch and grab the soles of his feet while he counted. Once done they helped Chōji relax himself before resuming their own stretches. "Thanks guys!"

Ino and Sakura quietly laughed at Chōji for being too fat to stretch on his own. At least they thought they were quiet, but Naruto heard them as did Chōji as he was closer. The look of hurt and anger that crossed Chōji's face as they laughed at him was enough to set Naruto off. "It's a good thing Chōji doesn't look like either of you two toothpicks. If he did the moment he tried to use any of his clan's jutsu he'd rip his body apart." He now had everyone's attention. "Sakura I understand she's just ignorant of the truth, but I really expected more from a Yamanaka but I guess it was too much to ask that you have respect for one of your family's closest friends." Both girls looked sheepish and angry at being called out. "Since neither of you two seem to understand why Chōji or his family have to eat so many calories allow me to educate you. They've found a way to convert calories into chakra. The more calories they store the better able they are to use their jutsu to maximum effect. Out of everybody here only Gai-sensei has a chance of going pound for pound in strength against Chōji and that's only because Gai-sensei has devoted his life to achieving the peak of physical conditioning that most people in their lives never even think is within the realm of possibility." Naruto walked over to Chōji who was staring at him in disbelief that somebody would defend him and his clan when people preferred to overlook them. "Don't worry about them Chōji, I for one am glad that we have the Akimichi around. One will never find a more loyal friend and ally." He smiled at the rotund boy, "Plus you guys make some of the best food in the entire village!" Naruto pulled out a pack of barbeque chips from one of his storage scrolls and handed them to Chōji, "Here. You'll need to keep your strength up for whatever else Gai-sensei has planned for us. I don't know what it is, but I know it'll be intense."

Chōji smiled and took the chips, "Thanks Naruto!"

The jōnin were quietly evaluating Naruto. Both impressed and surprised at the amount of knowledge he possesses. Kakashi was delighted that Naruto would stick up for one of his comrades in such a manner. He was surprised that it wasn't Shikamaru but when he looked at said boy he saw that he was about to jump in but decided not to after seeing Naruto handle it.

"Your student is most kind Kakashi." Gai roused Kakashi from his thoughts. Nobody was surprised by the lack of youth from the man. He had said he would tone it down and he was very much capable of being a normal person when the situation called for it.

"Yes, he is." He pulled out his favorite book and set it in front of his face. "I was told by Shikamaru and Shino that he is fiercely protective and loyal to the two of them. It would seem that might extend to the people they care about." That was a wonderfully good development as far as Kakashi was concerned. It would reinforce Naruto's ties to the village.

Gai waited for everybody to be done stretching to his satisfaction. "Yosh! Now before we begin the next phase, it's on you to remember the pace you set around this field. That is the baseline you will work with. Overtime you will increase the distance you can run within an hour." Neji and Sasuke were looking at him as if he was wasting their time much to his regret that one of his students would be so foolish. "The reason you will do this everyday is simple. There are many missions you may be expected to run for hours or even days at a time with very little rest in between. It's important to be able to set and maintain a pace your entire squad is capable of going. Remember this: your team is only as strong as its weakest member." Two scoffs met his words. He ignored them satisfied that the rest seemed to be taking what he said to heart. "Now we'll run through some more physical exercises. First up push-ups! This time we shall go for ten minutes. Same deal as before. It's not about doing as many as you can it's about pacing yourself to do the most you can in the allotted time. You will have plenty of opportunity to push yourself past your limits later. Begin!" The rest of the morning proceeded in a similar manner with Gai giving an exercise and the genin and jōnin running through it.

At the conclusion of the last exercise Gai called for lunch. "Alright. You have an hour for lunch." Kakashi unsealed a collection of bento boxes he had prepared specially for today. "For those of you who so wish these lunches were prepared by my Eternal Rival and they are meant to provide you with the sustenance you need to recover and prepare your body for this afternoon's training. Ino and Sakura this is non-negotiable for you two your dieting has done nothing but deprive your body of everything it needs to grow and develop properly. We may not be able to control what you eat outside of your time with us but so long as you are here you will eat what we give you." Kurenai forced the two girls to take the boxes she was holding and stood right in front of them until they ate everything held within. Surprisingly most everyone came and got their lunch from Kakashi. Gai was happy to see many of the genin taking note of what was in there to better structure their own diet. "I will drop by each of your homes later today with a dietary plan and training program that I believe will benefit you most. Contrary to what may have been told to you or what you think you know of me. I will not hold your hand. If you decide to ignore my advice do not think for one second I will waste anymore of my time on you."

Shikamaru, Shino, Chōji, and Naruto were all eating together a bit away from the rest of the group. "Man, I haven't been this tired since the first time we sought out Gai-sensei." Naruto was rubbing his legs. Not being able to warm up this morning was really starting to bite him in the ass. "Sorry I made you and Shino late Shika. I never expected something like this would happen."

"Do not blame yourself Naruto-san. Why you may ask? It is because none of us foresaw this occurrence. Though I am pleased with the decision to engage in this manner of training." Shino was delighted to see something like this happening. It was the most logical thing to do. In the Academy a variety of instructors are responsible for teaching different areas of expertise. Such a method should be continued with genin. Then when a genin is well rounded and becomes a chūnin can they begin to explore specialties.

"Just be glad I got you dressed before we came here Ruto." Shikamaru and Chōji laughed as Naruto blushed. Chōji fit right in with their little group. It wasn't that different from the old days minus the addition of Shino. Chōji and Shino had an unsuspecting similar interest. Surprisingly enough Chōji had an interest in butterflies. It was one of his closely guarded secrets as many would no doubt tease him for such an interest, Shino however began chattering away with Chōji about the different species common in the leaf. Chōji had more of an aesthetic interest while Shino a practical one. Still the common ground was comforting to both.

They each finished their lunch quickly intent on getting as much rest as they could before the afternoon which promised to be just as intensive as the morning was. Shikamaru decided to lay down in the grass and Naruto followed suit resting his head on Shikamaru's chest as he always did when he was close to him. Not caring if anybody else saw them. Shikamaru was his and nobody would take that from him. "Didn't know Chōji had an interest in butterflies. Just goes to show you can't judge a book by its cover."

"Yeah. Chōji always kept that a closely guarded secret. He was already getting teased about his weight no need to add something like a boy liking butterflies to the mix." Shikamaru thought that people could be so stupid over the simplest things. He wrapped one of his arms around Naruto and pulled the blonde closer to him. Chōji and Shino were now talking about what foods they liked and why. 'Leave it to Chōji to bring food up.' Shikamaru smiled as he thought of his friend. Meanwhile Naruto was falling asleep to the steady heartbeat emanating from Shikamaru's chest.

Everyone had sort of split off into their own little groups. Ino and Sakura were complaining about how dirty and smelly they must be and how their Sasuke-kun would never go out with them now. They also weren't fond of turning into some muscle-head with humongous arms as opposed to maintain a petite feminine body. Neji and Sasuke elected to brood on their own and not interact with anybody else. Hinata, Kiba, Lee, and TenTen had formed a clique of their own and were chattering away about various combat forms they enjoyed and were swapping notes on what worked and what didn't. Each trying to find new methods to incorporate into their own fighting styles. Despite her shyness Hinata was enjoying the conversation and actively participating.

The jōnin watched some distance away as their genin bonded with each other. "Honestly, this is going better than I expected it would right off the bat." Asuma was truly surprised at how well everyone seemed to click with each other. Though he was equally surprised to see Naruto snuggling up to Shikamaru who didn't seem to mind it the least. "I guess our kids are closer than we thought Kakashi."

Said cyclops nodded. "Shikamaru told me Naruto often does that to keep his nightmares away." Although they're much closer if the behavior he's seeing is any indication. Right now, Shikamaru was rubbing his hand along Naruto's arm as if he was trying to make the blonde relax. "We need to encourage their relationship as much as we can and get Naruto to forge new ones with the others. Shino and Shikamaru implied that Naruto was only loyal to them. Naruto will at least follow orders if commanded to, but if Shikamaru and Shino should ever die or leave there's no telling what might happen."

"There's no need for you to encourage young Naruto's relationship with Shikamaru and Shino. It has been burning brightly for years. I only hope the village can change its unyouthful ways before it's too late." Gai too was observing Naruto. He had a fondness for the boy that stemmed from him seeking out the taijutsu master asking for advice on physical training and the unusual style of fighting that he was looking forward to seeing more of this afternoon. Kakashi was looking at Gai asking many questions with his eye. "The trio you mentioned sought me out many years ago for

a training regimen which I happily provided. It's not often people seek me out for my advice after all. As for Naruto...can any of you really blame him if he decides to leave?" It went without saying that Naruto has suffered grievously at the hand of vengeful people. Gai certainly wouldn't be the one to try and stop the boy from leaving unless he was ordered to. He could only hope it never comes to that point.

Kurenai wanting to get the conversation back on a lighter note cut in. "I for one am happy with how things are going. Hinata has never talked so much at once." She suspected TenTen might be the reason for her sudden extroversion. A strong woman who takes her career as a shinobi seriously at roughly the same as Hinata was exactly what the girl needed to come out of her shell. "I hope you continue to join us Gai. Your young Kunoichi may just be the piece that I've been missing to truly help Hinata."

"Yosh! I had planned on doing just that. Lee is always looking for people to socialize with who are willing to tolerate his...personality. Young Kiba seems equally outgoing." Not to mention the fact Gai hoped the other teams would be able to help with Neji. "I only hope Neji is able to embrace the Springtime of his Youth!"

As much as Kakashi didn't want to encourage Gai, "I have the same hopes for Sasuke. I'm less concerned about Naruto leaving now than I was before. They won't be on any serious missions for some time, and we'll be there to protect them should something unexpected happen. Sasuke though..." He looked at the only member of his team to not be socializing with anybody choosing instead to gaze out across the field at nothing. No doubt picturing an epic battle between him and Itachi with Sasuke winning. "I'm not sure I'm the best one to help him. He's too much like how I was at his age." He really didn't want one of his teammates to die to facilitate the change necessary in Sasuke. "Lunch is almost over we should get them moving."

"Gather round everyone now comes the fun part of the day!" Gai was always excited to do some training and it showed. "Now we're going to run through the standard taijutsu katas. I know many of you have your own fighting style, but it provides an excellent foundation to develop your own style around." Most of the genin moved quickly so as to not waste time. Only four were complaining in their minds. "First we'll go through each individual kata before we run through the entire sequence. After we're warmed up, we'll break into smaller groups for some sparring. I and the rest of the jōnin will go around to each of you and offer our opinion of your skill and where to go from there. Let's go!"

They spent the rest of the afternoon evaluating where each of the genin was in taijutsu capability. Naruto of course was the most surprising of any of the genin. His style was an unusual mishmash of multiple different styles that made him unpredictable and a challenging opponent. Gai was excited to get a closer look as was Lee who enjoyed his spar with Naruto much more than he did with his other teammates. Not that they weren't challenging in their own right but Naruto was just too unpredictable to follow.

Ino and Sakura while not physically capable of enduring multiple spars over the course of the day were very proficient in the standard style taught at the Academy. It wouldn't help them out in the field, but it was an excellent place to start them from and as they conditioned their body better they'd be better able to grow into their own styles.

Shikamaru and Shino seemed to have a style similar to Naruto in that they preferred unpredictability over a standard combat form. Theirs was more highly structured and therefore less unexpected, but the feints and traps they were able to weave in as a result were more unsuspecting and equally more devastating.

Sasuke and Neji were far too rigid in their own styles. Though they were highly proficient and skillful in them, anybody who fights them will know exactly what they're facing as soon as they have an inkling of who they are. Since Neji looks like a typical Hyūga and Sasuke flaunts that he's an Uchiha they'll be defeated by any opponent with experience fighting their families. Not to mention that both their styles rely so heavily on their dōjutsu which one of them hasn't even awakened yet. It's like the never consider the possibility they won't have the use of their eyes.

Kiba was a very aggressive and straightforward fighter as is expected of members of his clan. Still his earlier conversation with Lee had him trying out new combinations that was making him a more challenging opponent especially when he brought in Akamaru as back up.

Hinata was still too timid and unwilling to hurt her friends so her performance was difficult to gauge but otherwise she was quite proficient in her family's preferred style. Still something seemed off about it to Gai, but he'd have to deal with that at another time.

TenTen's style was obviously dependent on the incorporation of various weapons to augment her limited physical strength. As such her taijutsu display had to be taken in account as if she was wielding said weapons. While such assessments are usually made without that Gai knew that TenTen was never without a weapon available.

Chōji packed quite the punch when he was able to hit. Sadly, he was far too slow to do so often, and it really highlighted the need for him to be faster or to work in conjunction with an ally to distract his opponent long enough for him to hit. Working on his speed would be difficult given that so many of his clan's techniques were dependent on strength. It was exceedingly difficult to achieve both.

By the end of the day all of the genin were exhausted. Even Naruto was getting tired despite his monstrous stamina. Gai-sensei was just a stamina freak when it came down to it, and a training sadist. Not that anybody would ever say that out loud. "You all did wonderfully for your first day. I shall drop by later with notes on how each of us thinks you should develop your own fighting style. Taijutsu is one of the most preferred styles of combat for all shinobi because it doesn't use up as much energy as others. Nevertheless, tomorrow I am told we shall be evaluating your ability to use ninjutsu. Be back here at the same time. The rest of this week will follow a similar schedule of us evaluating your skills and providing direction. After we're done with a general evaluation we'll begin to focus on each of you in smaller groups depending on where your strongest and weakest. Be sure to eat dinner and breakfast. Dismissed." The genin all left while the jōnin stayed to trade notes and prepare their student's training plan. Gai was the unofficial spokesman today but tomorrow it'd be Kakashi.

I won't be going through each day of training because I feel as if it'd be too similar and might get boring to read. I hope you found this chapter enjoyable.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

A/N: Appreciate the comments and I will certainly try to be less verbose...or at least break things up more. I tend to be very sesquipedalian in my writing. Can you tell I was reaching for anything to write here? Anyway, I tried something different. Tell me what you think. Is this better? Worse? Should it be set on fire and turned to ash for how horrible it was?

Great news! I still don't own Naruto.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Chapter 8 – Musical Hats

Hiruzen stood panting in the center of a group of four of his shinobi, ANBU specifically. Only one of whom was standing, albeit with some difficulty. The rest were on the ground panting hard from the intense workout they had just had. "I haven't had this much fun in ages. Oh, how I miss the thrill and excitement of the battlefield." He may have been a man of peace but there was no other experience like fighting on a battlefield. Yes, it was gruesome, bloody, violent, chaotic; but it was also exhilarating. One need not be a warmonger to appreciate the thrill of battle.

Seeing that one of his ANBU wasn't going to rest anytime soon he pulled out his pipe and promptly plopped himself on the ground. "Surely I must be old for one of my ANBU to outlast me in stamina." He smiled as the ANBU promptly collapsed onto the ground letting exhaustion overtake him. It brought him a small amount of satisfaction that his shinobi would stand beside him even if they were past the point a normal person would have given up. "You four have made an old man very happy, thank you." Four almost nods were sent his way. It was probably the most informality he had had from any of his shinobi in decades. 'No doubt they'll punish themselves for it later.'

Try as he might he still couldn't see what they saw in him. No longer was he the Shinobi no Kami. Those days ended well before the Yondaime Hokage assumed his post. Now he was simply an old man. Tired and weary. Longing for a rest that seemed to elude him. For even in his old age Hiruzen had no choice but to train like a young man for he was still the Hokage and for too long he had been sleeping. As he looked at his subordinates he felt the burden of his age more. Had he been even ten years younger or more in practice they would not have made him work as hard. All he had left now was decades of experience fighting in wars and opponents they could not even begin to comprehend.

Still they made him proud. Pushing a legend such as he was. He allowed his eyes to wander over his tired shinobi. Already they were getting their breathing under control while he was still trying to catch his breath. 'The Chūnin Exams can't get here fast enough.' His eyes came to rest on the youngest of the group. A man wearing a bear mask, no older than his own son. One of the last living relatives of a man he respected more than his own father. When his name came across the desk under a recommendation to join ANBU he had been shocked. Not because he lacked skill but because ANBU had short life expectancies, shorter than regular shinobi even. He did not want to fail that family more than he already has.

Feeling that he was being watched the bear masked man turned to identify the source. When he came to rest on the eyes of his leader he sat and waited. Having the silent gaze of the man he respected above all others in the village was starting to unnerv him and make him jumpy. "Is there something wrong Hokage-sama?"

That single question had the double effect of bringing Hiruzen out of his own wandering thoughts and having the other three members of the group immediately shift their gaze toward the elderly Hokage expressing as much worry and concern as ANBU could without actually speaking. Bear was now visibly jittery after being under his gaze for so long. "No. Nothing is wrong Bear. Just reminiscing over my lost youth. There's no need to treat me like an old man."

"Beg your pardon Hokage-sama, but weren't you just complaining about lost youth?" The bear masked ANBU was still jittery and therefore less inclined to hold his tongue. Realizing that he had spoken his thought aloud he immediately paled beneath his mask. As quickly as his panic began to overtake him it dissipated when he heard the old man's laughter.

Hiruzen relished the small moments when his ANBU slipped up. Try as he might he knew they'd never stop treating him with respect. "Yes. I suppose I was Bear." As he stood up the ANBU followed. "I thank you all for indulging an old man in his flights of fancy. I only hope that the next Hokage gets to enjoy the same loyalty and devotion you have shown me." Still smoking his pipe, he walked away as the foursome bowed to his retreating back. "Who knows maybe you lot will lighten up for him or her."

The walk back to his office was slow. No longer being tied to a desk piled with paperwork afforded him time to wander the village and chat with people like he used to when he was retired. He missed observing village life. The hustle and bustle of the merchant quarter, the quiet peace of the residential districts, and of course the angry shouts of young genin chasing Tora. The amount of money the village made off that cat was ludicrous. The most expensive D-rank in existence. Hiruzen was convinced that it was a conspiracy between the Daimyo as each village apparently had a 'Tora' or an equivalent.

He was soon joined by a presence that he just barely detected. "Hello Jiraiya." Truly he had been wrong when he was training them. Jiraiya may not have been a natural genius like Orochimaru was but one couldn't argue with the results. Seeing the defeated look on his student's face made him smile. "I'm afraid you're still too early to sneak up on me my boy."

The person in question seemingly appeared out of nowhere almost as if he had walked through the wall. "Hello to you too sensei. Out for an afternoon stroll I see."

"Well it is such a lovely day. Perhaps you'd care to join an old man on his walk." A small crowd was beginning to form some distance away as

people recognized Jiraiya. Hiruzen even noticed a few women who sent glares that promised great pain and humiliation at his student. 'No doubt Jiraiya was 'researching' while they were enjoying one of the many of the hot springs.' Not waiting for a reply Hiruzen just kept on walking. He knew the nature of their conversation would not be pleasant. Sure, enough Jiraiya fell into step beside him with a scowl on his face. "You can wait until we're in the privacy of my office can't you Jiraiya?" The man crossed his arms and pouted at being read so easily.

Hiruzen was soaking up as much pleasure as he could from the remainder of his stroll. For the time being he would leave Kakashi out of the conversation. Knowing that if either of his students knew there was a third candidate they'd latch onto the idea. Hiruzen wanted Tsunade to succeed him. Her specialty meant there would be no loss in field performance if she was Hokage. Kakashi was far too useful a jōnin to tie down behind a desk. Jiraiya's spy network could easily be based in Konoha but that makes it more difficult for him to contact his informants. Perhaps its time his student seeks his own successor in that regard.

Nearing the tower, he saw a small crater with one of his chūnin in it. He was being helped by a group of iryō-nin. The sight meant only one thing for him. "Oh, happy day! It seems my other student is here to see me too. It must be my birthday for my two dear students to visit an old man out of the blue like this." He ignored Jiraiya's pointed stare. The man was growing tired of the quiet walk. The thought of Tsunade being near made Jiraiya smile lecherously. 'No doubt you will be in the hospital by the end of the day Jiraiya.'

They strolled past the little gathering that was in the process of transferring the injured chūnin onto a litter to be moved to the hospital. 'It would seem Tsunade has not lost her temper. I wonder what he did to get her so angry.' The simultaneous thought ran through both of their minds. However, Jiraiya figured that simply being in the village made Tsunade angry and the poor fool was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Walking into the outer office saw Tsunade and Shizune sitting and 'patiently' waiting for his return.

Shizune saw the Hokage first. Tsunade was too busy brooding angrily in the chair to notice his arrival. At hearing Shizune's greeting she snapped her head in his direction and stood up as quickly as she could. Her entire demeanor screamed aggression and anger. "What the hell am I doing back here sensei?"

Hiruzen was not cowed. "Why thank you Tsunade. It's good to see you as well, and you too Shizune. Are you well?" He chatted briefly with the young woman who was holding a pig against her chest. He smiled at the young woman who was every bit of polite as his students weren't. "Well Shizune-chan you must want to explore the village a bit." He shifted his gaze towards Tsunade, "It's been so long since you've been back after all I'm sure there's much you'd like to do." Catching the hint and wanting to enjoy the village before her master left again, the young woman walked off to take in the sights. "Come. Let's speak in my office Tsunade, Jiraiya."

They walked into the office and Hiruzen moved to sit behind his desk. "Cat we are not to be disturbed. See to it that people listen this time." He didn't wait for a reply as he activated the silencing seals that had been an addition during the Nidaime's reign. Not because they would be discussing anything dangerous, but because Tsunade and Jiraiya would no doubt get loud and the distraction would be most unwelcome. Sure enough, immediately after he finished Tsunade demanded to know why she was here. A sentiment Jiraiya mirrored. "Well since neither of you would return my messages or show yourselves like I asked I decided I had to force your hand."

"You went too far sensei! I was in the middle of tracking Orochimaru. Months of work lost! Even if the arrival of your ANBU didn't give me away now I'll have to find the trail all over again!" He let his eyes wander over Tsunade. "Then again...it's always a pleasure to see Tsunade again."

She smiled sweetly at Jiraiya. "If you don't stop undressing me with your eyes you'll be speaking soprano for the rest of your life." The abject look of fear that came across his face accompanied by a shriek of fright was delightful. Truthfully, she enjoyed the little game she played with Jiraiya, but she would never admit that to anyone. Tsunade turned back toward Hiruzen and scoffed, "Never thought I'd find myself agreeing with the pervert though. Threatening Shizune with missing-nin status and preventing me from seeing money lenders just to force my hand. Honestly sensei what's gotten into you?"

"What can I say? You're both too stubborn to just suck it up and come back when I ask you to. Since asking was getting me no where I decided to tell you to get your ass back here in the best way I knew how." He put his pipe to the side not wanting the distraction right now. A rarity for the man to do which made it all the more difficult to decipher what he was thinking.

Tsunade sat down in one of the chairs in much the same way a petulant child would. "We've circled back to the original question then. Why are we here?"

Hiruzen sighed as Jiraiya sat down next to Tsunade, "I am old. Too old to keep doing this job." Already both could tell where this conversation was about to go and were about to shout out their arguments. Not in the mood to deal with it quite yet. "Be silent while I am speaking." The curt tone made both of his students sit back. It had been some time since they heard that tone. "For too long I have been an absentee leader and sensei. No longer. I know neither one of you wants this job but, I do not care."

He leveled the harshest gaze he could muster that would remind them of their time as genin under his 'tender' care. "I'll say it again. I. Do. Not. Care. One of you *will* be the Hokage whether you like it or not." It was always so easy to make people listen to you when you stop being the kind and loving grandfather. A lesson he had forgotten for so long. "Personally, I would prefer you, Tsunade, to succeed me." The look of outright rejection and anger that crossed her face was enough to preempt her. "Choose your words carefully girl. I have been lenient in the past. No longer."

It had been some time since Jiraiya and Tsunade were treated like children, and that was exactly how they felt right now. Like children who got caught taking a cookie from the jar. She decided against behaving and speaking without care. It wasn't often Sarutobi Hiruzen chose to lay down the law so to speak. "Why me, sensei? Jiraiya is a far better person than me and would do better as Hokage than I would." Of all the responses that the other two expected, that wasn't even within the realm of possibility.

Hiruzen relaxed his tone and posture seeing that Tsunade at least wouldn't blow up and insult her ancestors...yet. "You're the best medical specialist in the world Tsunade. You have had under your care a woman, who I have no doubt, is of exceptional skill now. Being Hokage would not affect your skills as much as it would Jiraiya. Regardless of whether or not you become Hokage as of this moment you are in charge of the hospital and the training of all iryō-nin." That got her head to turn toward him. "You can do whatever you want. No one above you except me, and eventually my successor of course. If that was you than you truly could do things however you want."

Tsunade was genuinely surprised. She had asked once before for such autonomy and authority and had been denied. "Why now sensei? Why not when I asked all those years ago?"

"It was war Tsunade. You were one of the best and strongest. I could not allow such a valuable asset be relegated to the village. Not when we

needed your strength on the battlefield." In her prime Tsunade had been a spectacular shinobi. Her presence, more than Jiraiya or Orochimaru, inspired and calmed people as they saw her. Allowing her to remain in the village would have been detrimental for morale. "After the war ended your suggestion was ill-timed. The war just ended, and we could not spare any funds for such an expensive program. However, before I could come to you with an alternative you left on 'extended leave.'" In truth Tsunade had left with Shizune without telling anybody. Had he not been Hokage she would have been declared a missing-nin.

This was not the direction she had expected this conversation to go. She had lost everything she cared about in the Second war. She barely survived the loss of her brother in the Second but losing Dan right after was too much. Seeing that her ideas were being shot down left and right she couldn't handle it. So, she left. Now she learns that might have been a rash decision. She always knew it was, but she never regretted it. She needed time away. "What were you going to tell me?"

The Hokage had to smile at his student. When she wasn't letting her anger rule her she was quite level headed. "I wasn't going to give you your program obviously, at least not then. I was prepared to let you pick a small group of shinobi, or civilians even, for you to train and then after we had recovered from the war, financially, they would have helped you manage your new program Tsunade." In a way that was how he justified her leaving with Shizune. The village could not afford such an expense but Tsunade could. Or at least that's how he sold it to them. The elder council had not been pleased when she left abruptly. Not that they were ever pleased with anything. "Now I offer you what you asked for."

Tsunade was tempted. As much as she loathed the village for taking everything she cared about away, the ones she cherished more than anything in this world loved this village with all their heart. There was also Shizune to consider. Dan's niece had become like a daughter to her, not that she ever told Shizune that. In her mind it was safer if she didn't let her know she cared. Every time she told somebody she cared they died. Throughout everything Shizune had been there. Never complaining when she had every reason and right to.

In reality Tsunade had little choice. She wouldn't let Shizune become a victim of her selfishness, but it'd be a cold day in hell before she became Hokage. "I can stick around for that I suppose. Find some other sap to be Hokage though because I won't do it." She really, *really*, didn't want to do it, and she really wasn't as great a candidate as Hiruzen believed. Oh, sure her name gave her sufficient pedigree, but a name isn't enough. Now she just had to convince her sensei that she wasn't all that great a choice. "And before you start thinking that I'm refusing out of spite I actually have legitimate reasons, sensei."

She smiled as she watched her sensei turn thoughtful and lean forward intrigued by her words. Tsunade raised up her right index finger, "One: I left this village for nearly twenty-five years and ignored my responsibility during the Third Great War. You might be willing to overlook that sensei, but the veterans that are still serving and those that suffered sure won't. They'll be resentful of someone like me becoming Hokage simply because of who my grandfather was." As much as this was a military dictatorship without the support of the troops the Hokage was truly powerless.

Another finger joined the first, "Two: We're not that much younger than you, sensei." Age was catching up to all of them. None of them were by any means unhealthy but things just tend to stop working and go wrong when you get older. "While most people would be intimidated by our reputation when has that really stopped things from happening? The village was embroiled in the Third War even with the Shinobi no Kami still at the helm. Reputation alone isn't everything and I am just as old as Jiraiya." Rarely would Tsunade acknowledge her own age but she'd do just about anything to get out of being Hokage. "It wouldn't be good for the village to play fast and loose with the position." Without stability things fall apart. Things fall apart with stability, but it was an easier fall to manage.

She didn't call out as she added another finger. "I currently have a debilitating weakness that may not be well known but it is quite inconvenient should combat break out in my presence." What that reason was didn't need to be said. There were only a handful of people who knew of her hemophobia, but one doesn't need to know of something to be able to exploit it. "Can't have the Hokage freezing up at the sight of blood. It just wouldn't be good for anyone."

Tsunade sighed as she added one more finger, "Finally, and really this is the most important reason that I can't stress enough, I really *really* don't want to be Hokage. Since you can't exactly force anyone to do it I can tell you right now I will categorically refuse any attempts to make me the Hokage, and should you somehow force me to take the position well..." She smiled sweetly at Jiraiya and Hiruzen but neither felt comfortable seeing that particular smile on her face, "let's just use our imaginations okay?"

A sudden epiphany came over her. "Oh, and five: The pervert," She lazily jerks her thumb toward Jiraiya, "would make a far better Kage. The idiot doesn't have *any* reason to refuse, is exceptionally devoted to the village, and more importantly has people's respect." When in doubt: throw Jiraiya in front of you and hope for the best. It's never failed her before. Plus, it was always amusing to see the overdramatic overreactions that spewed forth. "Lest we all forget he did train a Hokage."

As if on queue Jiraiya spoke up for the first time. "Woah slow down there Hime!" Like Tsunade, Jiraiya really didn't want to be Hokage. "I'm the last person who should take the hat. I mean come on do you really want someone like *me* as Hokage?" As if to emphasize his point he stood up and held his arms out inviting them to really look at him. He made no secret of his perversion. It helped make for an excellent cover. After all nobody is going to bat an eye at a well-known pervert and degenerate walking into a whore house, a bar, or any other shady business. What better way to meet contacts when people think you're just out whoring or drinking. 'Not to mention that whoring and drinking was lots of fun!'

"Now more than ever I need to keep an eye on threats to the village." The whole room knew he meant Orochimaru and not every threat to the village. "That's something I can't do stuck behind a desk all the time." The last thing Jiraiya wanted was to be stuck here all day every day for the foreseeable future. Like Tsunade the village just held too many memories. The day his best friend was revealed to be a horrible monster. The day his student became Hokage. The day his student was married in secret. The day his student died far too young. No. Staying wasn't an option for him.

He was also hearing troubling rumors of a new group of mercenaries. A powerful band of rogue ninja doing jobs for dirt cheap. If rumors were to be believed Deidara the Mad Bomber and Uchiha Itachi are both members, and his former teammate had also been a member once. Why Orochimaru joined and left eluded him though he had his theories. Orochimaru wanted something from them and joining was the most expedient way to get it. He either got it or failed and left soon after.

Despite the serious tone the conversation had carried Jiraiya just couldn't help but be himself. "And more importantly. How the hell am I supposed to conduct the crucial research for my next book as Hokage." He had never liked the serious nature of his sensei or teammates mainly because they never seemed to take a moment and enjoy life. Tsunade seemed to bounce between the two extremes and never found that middle ground. "I've made no secret of my interests and it would be unbecoming of the Hokage, and I have no plans on stopping anytime soon."

Hiruzen sat silently as his two students began to argue over Jiraiya's perverseness. Tsunade had made several good points about why she was unsuited to be Hokage but nothing that couldn't be changed with time. The Chūnin exams weren't for six months which meant the finals weren't for

at least seven. Many things can change in seven months, and at the end of the day the shinobi will obey the Hokage regardless of whether or not they like him or her so long as their instructions are in the best interest of the village. Hiruzen would also be taking a more active role in his retirement. Leaving a new Hokage to deal with his teammates would not be wise.

He truly wished his students weren't so difficult. 'It's unfortunate that the only one of my students who wanted to be Hokage was the most undeserving.' Choosing Jiraiya made the most sense as Tsunade alluded to. He was well respected, despite his habits. Devoted to the village. Some might argue to a fault, but such a thing is good in a leader. The only real issue would be that Jiraiya is very useful out in the field. Removing him abruptly and without a replacement would not be good.

Hiruzen still believed that Tsunade was the best choice. She may not have the older shinobi's respect or support, but the younger generation still reveres her for her skills and accomplishments. Her skill in medical ninjutsu would be put to better use here in the village training up new iryō-nin which the village sorely lacked at the moment. They had skilled individuals, but too few of them to utilize to best effect. Presently iryō-nin were rarely allowed to leave the village for fear they might be lost. 'Young people simply have no interest in being healers these days.'

She was also the granddaughter of the first Hokage and that still carried weight in the world. Senju Hashirama was a legend on par with the Rikudō no Sennin. Such a legacy still carries weight even if everyone believes the Sage to be nothing more than a myth. Having a Senju once again be Hokage would be a major political victory for him. Jiraiya's name just didn't carry the same weight as *Senju* Tsunade's did.

It was a difficult position for Hiruzen. Both his students would be perfect for the role albeit for different reasons. Neither one wanted it which made things all the more difficult. Kakashi was more of a last resort. The man was a legend of his time but hardly carried with him the power necessary to be Hokage. 'Something I'll be rectifying. As it stands now I have no shinobi capable of standing up to the likes of the Akatsuki if Itachi is to be believed.' Jiraiya and Tsunade would be playing a role in training the jōnin and ANBU to be better. 'And this gives me time to settle who will be Hokage without revealing Kakashi.'

Hiruzen let the argument play out for a little while longer. It was amusing to see his students bicker like a married couple despite all claims that it was a purely one-sided relationship. Tsunade was stubborn much like his Biwako had been. He thought fondly of his wife. She was perfect in every sense of the world in his eyes. Courting her had been a nightmare as she was quite stubborn and Hiruzen was so full of himself in his youth. Never did he learn why she agreed to wed him but only ever so happy she did.

It truly amazed him how his students could argue over the color of the sky. Clearly, they were running out of things to argue about and only trying to keep the argument alive for the sake of more arguing. "How fascinating. I had no idea that the color of the sky was such a hotbed issue." He could feel the amusement roll off the ANBU still in the room as his two students looked at him as if just remembering where they were.

"It's clear we won't settle which of you will be wearing this hat today." That was both good news and bad news in the eyes of Tsunade and Jiraiya. "I honestly never expected to resolve it at all, but there's still time. Seven months at least. Until such time the two of you will be here to help make my life easier." Jiraiya was all set to object at being confined to the village but Tsunade seemed to have already accepted that. "Tsunade as discussed you will be in charge of the hospital and training our medics. I can only hope what you find won't disappoint you." He looked toward Jiraiya. "As for you Jiraiya, you will begin looking for a replacement to manage your spy network."

"But sensei! Orochimaru is still out there!" Jiraiya hated the thought of being stuck here for seven months. He wasn't as great a candidate for Hokage as they thought, at least in his mind. Nothing would change his opinion of himself. "I have to be out there to track him. Who knows what he could get up to if I stay off his trail for long."

Hiruzen couldn't help but roll his eyes at the thought. "He'll do exactly what he's been doing even with you on his trail. Whatever he wants to. What happens when you pass on from this world Jiraiya? Who do we rely on for your information then?"

Jiraiya had already thought of that and made arrangements that the information his informants gathered would still make its way to the village even if he were to die. "I've already taken care of that sensei. Even if I die the information will still come."

Hiruzen nodded. "Yes. Information from an unknown and unnamed source that I or the next Hokage should just accept and trust blindly?"

"My informants can be trusted sensei." Jiraiya pouted at being doubted.

"Can they? How can I or anyone else trust them when we know not who they are?" Shinobi listened to everything but that doesn't necessarily mean they'd trust everything they hear. Misinformation is more dangerous than no information at all. Deception and misdirection were the staples of the shinobi world. "You might trust them Jiraiya. I do not. I trust you. So, to rectify that problem you will select at least one shinobi to start learning the intricacies of your network. If you become Hokage they will replace you so choose wisely. No one is off limits for you to choose from." Like Tsunade Jiraiya was essentially being given *carte blanche* to do what he wanted with Konoha's intelligence infrastructure.

"Now in addition to those duties the both of you will be helping me train the jōnin and ANBU currently in rotation." His students looked at him in bewilderment. It was one thing after the other to them. "We have no shinobi on par with either of you, and I am old. What is going to happen when we die and people like Orochimaru are still out there? Do the two of you think anybody else could handle him right now?" They both shook their heads in the negative. "Exactly. The closest we have is Kakashi, and he would still lose in a direct confrontation with my wayward student."

Jiraiya begrudgingly accepted the fact that he had to stay at least for the time being. It by no means meant he accepted it but unlike Tsunade he wasn't willing to just walk away from the village. Something Hiruzen knew. "First things first though. Hawk." One of the ANBU appeared before them. "Go and bring Uzumaki Naruto here." A simple nod and a **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** later and the ANBU was gone just as quickly as he arrived. "Now that you're finally here Jiraiya you can do what I called you for in the first place."

Hiruzen had wanted the seal keeping the Kyūbi at bay inspected years ago but Jiraiya refused to respond to any of his letters. It was decidedly frustrating for the Hokage that the village's only true seal master ignored him. Turning to the stack of folders on his desk he divided them up into three piles. His plan was simple. Evaluate where each of his shinobi was in terms of skill and then figure out how to make them better, stronger, and faster. "Let's go through these and talk about how you two can contribute toward this plan of mine." He needed more medics and fūinjutsu experts, and he was going to get them one way or the other.

On the other side of the village...

Kakashi was currently working with four of the genin on their chakra control. Gai was called up for a mission saddling them each with an extra

genin until his return. Although Kakashi used the term 'working' loosely. Two of the genin in question were content to go at it alone without much hand holding, a trait he was grateful for. He wasn't much of a hands-on teacher. Right now, he was 'helping' Naruto, Shino, Sakura, and Ino with water walking.

Naruto and Shino were off by themselves and the ones who didn't mind Kakashi's teaching style. Sakura and Hinata needed a more involved approach as unfortunate as it was. "Water isn't static like a tree. It changes so you must change with it." Kakashi was at a loss as to why either one was struggling. Sakura had picked up tree walking so easily and yet was having difficulty walking more than a few steps before falling in. The Yamanaka always had exceptional chakra control, so Ino's difficulty was equally surprising. Part of him suspected it was more to do with who she was in proximity to rather than ability.

Sakura and Ino got along quite well when they weren't arguing over Sasuke. When they were near Naruto they both changed. After Naruto chastised them in front of everybody for picking on Chōji their dislike for him clearly increased. Yet if he didn't know any better he'd swear they were both afraid of Naruto. From what little he could make out when he was not eavesdropping on their conversations he found out that they missed the old Naruto. The loud-mouthed idiot who never talked back to them.

Sakura's mother apparently blamed the loss of her position on Naruto and continued to disparage the boy in front of Sakura. Who not having any reason not to believe every word her mother says. It didn't matter to her if she and the rest of the council had been caught abusing their position and power for personal gain and profit. No. Everything was because of Naruto. It obviously made Sakura weary of the boy. Its inevitable that the team dynamics will be thrown off.

Ino was simpler. She just didn't like people not listening to her, doing things her way, or being called out in front of others. Naruto embarrassed her when as far as she was concerned she wasn't doing anything wrong. Ino couldn't allow that. Kakashi heard from the other jōnin that they had spent some time trying to devise a way to get back at the blonde-haired boy but realized they didn't know enough about him to be able to do so.

Naruto was another problem for him. The boy wasn't actually a problem and was quite a devoted student. He listened to all of them without much complaint unless he thought something could be done better. But there were times Kakashi saw a different Naruto and it always involved Sasuke. On more than one occasion where Sasuke was sparring with somebody Naruto would flinch and go for his kunai pouch. Shikamaru or Shino were usually there to stop him, but Kakashi noticed it all the same.

Naruto was also jumpy. Not in the way a normal person was, but in little ways. The instinctual need to hold a weapon in his hand for one. The way he'd act like he was casually looking around the area as he looked for threats and escape routes. How he tensed at any unexpected sound from the woods and waited with baited breath until he confirmed it wasn't a threat. The subtle signs of an impending panic attack only to be calmed down by one of his friends. Like the kunai thing every time Sasuke was around those behaviors got more pronounced.

The way Naruto behaved reminded him of a shinobi who's spent too much time on the battlefield. Kakashi was certain he wasn't the only one who noticed the odd behavior but so far none of them had commented on it.

'This is why I didn't want to deal with genin.' Kakashi sighed internally as he thought of his charges. They may legally be adults, but they were still very much children. Children were chaotic creatures and having never been a child Kakashi did not know how to handle them. He sighed again as Sakura took another dip in the pond. "Sakura, Ino is something bothering you two today? You both picked up tree walking so quickly. I expected more out of you both." Granted they both had smaller reserves to try and manipulate that made it easier he was still expecting quick results.

Ino didn't mind the apparent disappointment from Kakashi. She didn't particularly like the man, so she put very little stock into the things he said and did. As far as she was concerned Kakashi was just a lazy pervert. The fact that he was always late and even now reading that weird orange book she sees in the adult section of bookstores only reinforced her opinion of him. Still she didn't understand why she was struggling. Water walking wasn't that different from tree walking. The principle was the same, use your chakra to stick to the water. Every time she tried and thought she had it she would fall in.

At hearing her sensei's disappointment Sakura immediately deflated as she pulled herself back onto land. For all the confidence she had in her ability Sakura had a surprisingly delicate psyche that seemed to shatter at even the tiniest hint of criticism. It made training her all the more difficult. "No. Nothing's wrong sensei, this is just difficult." She kept her eyes down and away from Kakashi's as she knew he was looking directly at her. Being under scrutiny made her uncomfortable.

Kakashi nodded seemingly accepting of her answer. Water walking was more difficult than tree walking but with how highly Sakura had been praised for her intelligence in the Academy and how quickly she learned tree walking he expected her to get a handle on this faster. "Tell me how to use chakra to climb a tree Sakura." Kakashi would try drawing a straight line from point A to point B and hope she could follow it.

Without hesitating Sakura started answering. "The way to utilize chakra to climb a tree is to focus your chakra to the point of contact between the tree and yourself. The most common way is to use your feet to walk up the tree. However, in theory you should be able to do so with any part of your body assuming you can focus and exert your chakra appropriately." Her response was very clinical and robotic. As if she was reading from a book on the subject. "If you use too much chakra than the force of your chakra pushes you away from the tree. Too little chakra and you will just slip and fall."

"Very good." The girl seemed to perk up a bit at the praise. It bothered Kakashi that she was so very...emotional. He worried that if she didn't get control of them then she would get herself or somebody else killed. "Now tell me about the tree's role in the exercise." He could tell that Sakura was confused as if he had asked the strangest question in the world. He imagined she was thinking something along the lines of 'The tree's role? The tree doesn't have anything to do with the exercise other than to be climbed.' People often forget about the poor tree as they use it for training. He could only hope she would find an answer.

Ino was equally as perplexed by Kakashi's question. The tree was only there to be climbed. While most shinobi in the leaf called this chakra control exercise 'tree walking' that was because there was an abundance of trees. Not everywhere has trees in such prevalence as the Village hidden in the Leaves. A more accurate name for this exercise would be 'surface clinging'. The tree was ultimately irrelevant and could easily be replaced by a wall, a rock, or any other hard surface. This brought her mind back to Kakashi's question. 'Obviously I'm missing *something*, but what?'

Sakura hesitated before she answered, "The tree is there to be climbed." Her statement was said in such a way that it could be interpreted as a question.

In reality Kakashi's question was a simple and obvious as they thought. His goal was to get them thinking about trees. What made trees different from water. Kakashi smiled at her which seemed to make the pinkette angry at the thought that he was patronizing her. "Right again. Now what are

the differences between a tree and water?"

Ino and Sakura once again looked at their sensei like he was a complete and utter moron. 'What kind of question is that?! A tree is a tree, and water is water! Who doesn't know the difference between them?' The simultaneous thought ran through both genin's head.

"Go on! Don't be shy now. Tell me what's different between the two. It's not a trick question." Kakashi wanted them to think for themselves not expect somebody to give them the answer. It's easy to say you know that trees are different from water, but humans have a tendency to overlook the obvious. This creates knowledge gaps, and, in this instance, it was preventing them from realizing that they already subconsciously knew the answer. They already knew what they had to do to walk on water they just weren't aware of it.

Sakura was still hesitant as she started describing water as she eyed her sensei. "Well...water is wet." Seeing Kakashi nod she kept going still confused as to the purpose. "It's blue. Can be salt water or fresh water. It's never still." Kakashi looked at her hopeful that she had noticed how his gaze shifted ever so slightly at landing on the answer. "You can drink it..."

Sakura didn't notice Kakashi's body sigh in disappointment as she kept describing water before moving on to trees, but Ino did. 'Why did Kakashi-sensei deflate there?' So far everything Sakura said was true about water and trees. So why would Kakashi react negatively? What was the purpose of this stupid line of questioning? It got her thinking about what Sakura said. 'Water is never still.' Even when it's calm it's always in motion. Trees never move unless acted upon by an outside force.

Ino's eyes widened as she realized what the problem was. She kept thinking this was exactly like tree walking. It was but it also wasn't. Water always moved and shifted, so she'd have to shift her chakra as well. She jumped up startling Sakura while Kakashi merely watched her with interest. She carefully put one foot on the surface of the water and tried to match the shift in the water with her chakra. Once she felt confident that she could do it she put her other foot out further. Each step was made with trepidation that she might fall in at any moment. Since she hadn't yet fallen in she slowly started walking further out. Her steps became more confident with each subsequent one until she was almost in the center of the lake.

Kakashi smiled and spoke loudly enough for Ino to hear. "Well it seems like one of you figured it out. Well done Ino." As the blonde girl started shouting with glee her concentration wavered and she promptly fell beneath the surface once again. Kakashi smirked not that anybody could see through his mask. "Although it seems you still need to work at it a bit Ino-chan." Ino barely heard him over her coughing and sputtering as she had inadvertently gotten a mouthful of water.

Sakura was feeling many things at the moment. Happiness, jealousy, sadness, frustration, joy, disappointment. The cacophony of feelings resulted in her just staring at Ino. She was happy her friend had accomplished something, but also jealous of that. She was saddened by her inability to do the same which frustrated her. She was overjoyed when Ino fell in which seemed to bounce her back into her rivalry with said blonde. Finally, she was disappointed that Ino was ahead of her and therefore closer to winning Sasuke.

"Ano...Kakashi sensei?" Sakura looked back at her sensei who she thought looked proud. "How did Ino do that?" She couldn't understand how Ino who had been struggling just as much as she had suddenly was able to run across the lake. As Kakashi looked at her the pride seemed to lessen. It made Sakura think that Kakashi wasn't proud of her which sent her back into a downward tailspin of self-loathing.

Kakashi saw his student seem to spiral into despair. He didn't know how to comfort her or encourage her. He wouldn't give her the answer. That wasn't his style. "You already know the answer Sakura. I imagine you gave Ino the answer. The difference between you two is she saw it and you haven't." Sakura looked back up at him with a mix of sadness and confusion. "You are smart Sakura. If I had to guess I'd say you have eidetic memory. You retain information, but you don't process it. Your head is just a mass of information carefully categorized and organized for immediate recall. Now it's time to take what you know and learn from it."

Sakura was even more confused now. What Kakashi was saying didn't make any sense to her. How could she know the answer but not know it? And what was the difference between knowing something and understanding it? The Academy tests had been so easy for her. Simply read and regurgitate the answer for the test. She learned what she was taught. The instructors had told her what was important, so she memorized it.

Kakashi kept staring at her as she struggled with her thoughts. Had she not been so engrossed in her own mental conversation she might have been unnerved. As it was she was completely oblivious to her sensei's gaze.

'Kakashi says I know the answer and I gave Ino the answer...but what is it?' Sakura was growing increasingly frustrated. **'I don't know what it is, but you need to figure it out before that blonde-haired pig sinks her fangs into Sasuke, CHA!'** The reminder that she was losing Sasuke to Ino reinvigorated Sakura. 'As if I'd let that nasty wench dig her claws into Sasuke. She only got the answer because of me which obviously means I'm better!'

Her confidence rebounding allowed her to focus on everything that had happened today. 'Kakashi-sensei said we'd be working on water walking since we were so good at tree walking.' She had been saddened that she wouldn't be spending more time with Sasuke and that she'd be stuck being near Naruto. Almost as soon as they arrived here though Naruto and Shino went off on their own. Kakashi didn't seem to mind. Sakura initially thought that meant Kakashi didn't care about Naruto and that he'd never be able to do this. 'Yet Naruto and Shino hadn't seemed to struggle at all.'

She shook her head and stopped thinking about Naruto. 'That's one problem for another day. I need to focus right now!' Kakashi had told them that water walking applied the same concept as tree walking did. Even so she couldn't seem to do it. 'With a tree the amount of chakra necessary to stick to it stayed the same, and if water walking applied the same concept shouldn't it be the same?' She would match her chakra flow with that of the water to balance herself and then something would change, and she'd fall.

As if a switch had been flipped in her mind she started yelling at herself. 'Wait! That's right. Water is constantly moving and changing. That's why every time I didn't change the flow of my chakra to match I fell through the water.' She stood up just as excitedly as Ino did before and started running across the water much to Kakashi's and Ino's surprise. 'I have to prove I'm better than you pig! If you could instantly walk across the water than I'm going to run!'

Kakashi eye smiled as the pinkette got further and further away from him. "Nicely done Sakura. Now I want the two of you to spar on the water. You might be able to walk, or run, on water but can you fight on water?" The two girls started glaring at each other before they started fighting. It started out fairly simple taijutsu match but quickly devolved into what Kakashi could alone describe as a cat-fight. 'Little girls are more interested in chasing boys than being shinobi.' Still he wouldn't stop them. If this is what helped them who was he to interfere?

Shino and Naruto had been 'practicing' water walking by themselves. "It seems Sakura-san and Ino-san have figured it out Naruto." Shino's voice was as dull as ever to the untrained ear.

"So they have Shino, so they have." Naruto had been keeping a frosty difference from the other genin. When he first thought about resetting his life he hadn't anticipated his reaction to being back. All he wanted was to make things better for himself. To make himself happy. He had ignored and forgotten that most of his early friendships were not healthy relationships. He hated to think what things would be like without Shikamaru or Shino beside him.

They were taking a break from their conversation, so they could think of a course of action. With the Oto-Suna invasion soon they really needed to neutralize Danzō. The man had helped Orochimaru get into the village and provided him intelligence on the Kazekage's movements. They had no idea if the Kazekage was dead or not. The desert heat and subsequent freezing made an accurate time of death difficult to determine. Right now, they were operating under the assumption that the Yondaime Kazekage was dead.

Naruto was of the mindset that the easiest way to neutralize Danzō was just that, to kill him. Shino though argued that killing Danzō abruptly would create problems. The man had his fingers in many dealings both within and beyond the Village. His sudden disappearance would cause problems. They needed a legitimate way to remove him from power and then kill him. They could at least agree on that much. Danzō had to die for all the things he's done. Though Danzō might say everything he does is for the sake of the village, in reality it was for his own ambition.

"Back to what we were talking about Shino. You know what I think should be done." Naruto didn't really care how Danzō died so long as he did. "You and Shikamaru have always been better at handling politics. I'm really just more of a smash first kind of guy."

Shino snorted. He actually snorted in amusement. The look on Naruto's face was priceless to Shino. "I never thought I'd be the cause of that face Naruto-san. It feels good." Naruto smiled brightly at him. A genuine smile. "Yes. You really are terrible at politics, aren't you? You definitely didn't bring Senju Tsunade to the village to be the Godaime Hokage. Nor did you reinforce our relationship with Takigakure by saving the village leader's life. How could any of us forget that it wasn't you who saved Gaara from himself and essentially put the Godaime Kazekage in power. Then there was the time you didn't save the Daimyō of the Land of Snow/Spring and secure Konoha a beneficial trade agreement. Need I go on?"

Each time Shino mentioned one of his exploits Naruto could only laugh as he remembered his adventures. His life may not have been perfect...but it was interesting to say the least. "Alright, alright, I get it. I'm not *terrible* at politics." Shino radiated pride at being validated. "But even you can't ignore that most of my 'political' achievements involved hitting something." Naruto would always have the last laugh.

Shino shrugged not willing to play Naruto's game. "You simply have a different style of politicking Naruto-san. Your way will not work with Danzō." Nobody could deny that Danzō was smart. The man was probably one of the smartest men in the world. He was definitely one of the craftiest and cunning of individuals. "Even if Danzō disappears his ambition would not." Even after he was exposed and dead his Root continued to operate under the careful hand of some of his top lieutenants. The only reason they weren't a problem is because the Akatsuki was a mutual threat that needed handling. Much in the same way Orochimaru was on their side during the war.

"No. We cannot just kill Danzō. We need to expose him. We need to put pressure on Hokage-sama that he can no longer ignore. Their renewed relationship will embolden Danzō. So long as he has the Sandaime's support he is safe." Shino knew what he was suggesting would have far reaching consequences. Danzō had at some point and on many occasions stuck his finger in other nation's business. They would not take kindly to that. Any plan that involved exposing Danzō would harm the Village's reputation in the world. Therefore it required careful planning.

"You know what you're saying right Shino?" Naruto asked grimly as he watch his friend nod. "Exposing Danzō is also risky when it comes to two of our delightful Uchiha friends."

Shino didn't want to expose *all* of Danzō's dealings. Just enough to force the Hokage's hand. "Obviously we would not expose everything Naruto-san. It would not be good for the other villages to unite against Konoha because of Danzō." The underlying knowledge that Sarutobi Hiruzen would sacrifice Danzō for the sake of peace would not save them. Politics between the Five Great Nations was like swimming with sharks. You were relatively safe...until there was blood in the water. "I am more interested in exposing his secrets in the Village."

Naruto nodded. He could get behind that. It wasn't as dangerous as exposing him to the whole world. "How would you go about it?"

This would be Shino's project. Naruto had his own things to handle. Shino understood that he would probably be doing a lot of this on his own without the blonde. "The easiest way is to start asking questions. Many clan children disappeared before and after the Uchiha Incident. The loss of the clan overshadowed these disappearances and they were quickly forgotten. Danzō also had his agents remove traces of the missing children's existence." After Danzō died Shino regained his memory of Torune and how he went with Danzō so that Shino wouldn't have to. He didn't know how Danzō manipulated his memories, but he knew that he had at least one Yamanaka and the Sharingan. Either would be sufficient.

"Shikaku-san should be easy to prod into doing his own digging." Naras loved puzzles, and anything involving Danzō was going to be puzzling. There was also the fact that Danzō took children from the Yamanaka and Aburame clans. Not one person thought those were the only two clans he plucked children from. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that Danzō had an Uchiha and a Senju in his possession. When it comes to Danzō *nothing* was impossible. "I shall also speak with my father about Torune, indirectly. Very few Aburame have managed to bond with the rinkaichū and Torune's disappearance was devastating to the clan, but as mentioned before there was much to get done in the wake of the Uchiha Incident."

"A good place to start. Perhaps we can even bring to light Danzō's involvement with the Uchiha. It would certainly help deal with the Sasuke issue." Revealing the truth to Sasuke was a risk. It's why they hadn't told him yet. He was simply too unstable to trust with anything. He already destroyed Konoha once because of his madness...they wouldn't risk a second time. If and when Sasuke learns the truth they were all prepared to neutralize that threat. But if they could reveal the extent of Danzō's treachery, and convincingly lay the entirety of blame on Danzō, then maybe just maybe they could save Sasuke from himself. 'Either way the situation comes to ahead. Sasuke either changes or shows his true colors. At which point we go with plan B.'

"If you succeed there will need to be a new Hokage. There's no way the clans or the jōnin will accept the continued tenure of the Sandaime." Not even his condemnation and rage at Danzō would save his reputation. The man has simply done too much under his rule, almost all of it condoned. Everything Danzō touches invariably turns to ash. It was fitting for the Shinobi no Yami.

Shino nodded. "A new Hokage is necessary regardless. Sandaime-sama is old. If you were not twelve I would say you should be Hokage again. No. Even though you are twelve you should still be Hokage. The Village does not deserve you, but you would be the best choice." Though idealistic for much of his life Naruto had learned that sometimes difficult choices must be made. War is a great teacher of life lessons. Naruto would

always put his people before anything else. The idea of a village was not as important as the people who lived there. Many Kage lost sight of that. The village became the most important thing. The village's image. The village's wealth. The village's strength. The village's power. The people who contributed to that got lost and forgotten.

Naruto was always surprised by how devoted to Shino was. Even though a majority of people felt he would be an excellent Hokage, hence why he was chosen, the Aburame's unwavering support was surprising for the quiet and reclusive clan. Naruto hugged Shino. "I don't deserve you or Shikamaru." He pulled away but kept his gaze fixed on Shino. "But I'm glad you both are my friends and here with me. Maybe I'll be Hokage again. I honestly don't know if it's what I want anymore." Naruto never thought he was the best at anything. So, every time he heard people say how great he was he didn't see what they saw. To him it was mind boggling to have people put so much faith in him. "I can't be Hokage now though. With the way things are already changing we have no idea who the Hokage will be anymore."

Though all three of them still thought it would be Tsunade. She was just the best choice.

Kakashi had been watching Shino and Naruto as subtly as he could all day. They had immediately separated themselves from the group which was fine with Kakashi for the purposes of teaching, but it worried him that they were putting distance between themselves and their comrades. Kakashi had a very hands-off approach when it came to being sociable and he considered himself a poor example to emulate.

"Taicho." The single word was accompanied by the appearance of a masked individual behind him.

Kakashi sighed. "I'm not ANBU anymore how long will you lot keep calling me Taicho?" His question went unanswered. "What can I do for you Hawk?"

"Hokage-sama requires Uzumaki's presence, Taicho." Even if the Hokage had ordered him to get Naruto, Hawk still intoned that he was requesting Kakashi's permission to take one of his genin.

Kakashi nodded. "Naruto!" The boy in question turned toward him. He waved him over to him. "What does Hokage-sama want with him?" The question was made as Naruto started walking across the water toward them as the rest of the group watched.

Hawk didn't know, but suspected it was about the Kyūbi. Kakashi may not be ANBU anymore but he was still a well-respected captain. Something not easily forgotten. "Jiraiya-sama has returned."

"Ahh. I see." Kakashi drew the same conclusions as Hawk. The Hokage wanted to inspect the seal. Jiraiya was hard to locate when he didn't want to be found. The fact that the Hokage sent for him years ago was testament to that fact, or the man ignored the summons. It wasn't his concern either way. Once Naruto was in front of him he gestured to Hawk. "Hokage-sama has summoned you." Naruto nodded and moved to stand next to Hawk who placed a hand on his shoulder and disappeared in a **Shunshin (Body Flicker)**.

Sakura and Ino were curious as to why the Hokage summoned Naruto, but Kakashi noticed that Shino seemingly went back to his own training as soon as Naruto was gone. "Sensei. What does the Hokage want with Naruto?"

Kakashi's eye smiled at the both of them. "I honestly don't know." He had some ideas, but they didn't need to know and weren't supposed to know. "Now that you both have water waking down," At least to the point they wouldn't fall in immediately, "here are some scrolls for you both." He pulled a scroll from his vest and two scrolls appeared in its place. "I expect you two to share these and help each other."

Sakura and Ino each grabbed a scroll. Sakura's scroll dealt with basic injuries and how to treat them while introducing the principles of the **Mystical Palm Technique**. "Medical ninjutsu?" She was both surprised and intrigued by what she was seeing on the scroll. But it looked incredibly complicated and she doubted if she'd actually be able to learn this.

Ino's scroll contained a discussion of the relationship of genjutsu and psychology. The importance of reading your opponent to tailor a genjutsu to their weaknesses and fears and thus better entrap and disable them. "Genjutsu?" It wasn't a field her family went into.

Kakashi nodded at them both. "Yes. The two of you and Hinata have what the others will never have. An extremely high degree of chakra control. Perfect for genjutsu and iryō ninjutsu." His eye shifted to focus on Sakura. "Sakura, your eidetic memory will make you an incredible asset to any team and beyond if you apply yourself like I know you can to the pursuit of the healing arts. Genjutsu would help you out in the field by both increasing your combat ability and helping you protect any wounded person under your care." Medics were often the first target of any engagement and their survival was essential.

Kakashi shifted his focus to Ino. "Ino, your family's unique talents and the importance you already place on psychology will benefit you greatly as you learn genjutsu. In all honesty I don't know why other members of your clan haven't pursued it as much. Psychology and the ability to discern your opponents fears and weaknesses through observation, or in your case mental invasion, will make your genjutsu all the more real and dangerous. Ergo more effective."

"As it is now both of you will most likely be in a supporting role regardless of what team you're on. That's why I expect the both of you to learn the material on those scrolls before I get others to help you with actual techniques." The two girls looked at him with a questioning look. "I am not a medic and though I can use the **Mystical Palm Technique** it is far too risky for me to try and treat anyone. Neither am I a genjutsu expert. I can detect and create them just fine but genjutsu is a rarely utilized art because of the difficulty in making the genjutsu unnoticeable. Kurenai will be the one to help you two the most. She isn't known as the Genjutsu Mistress for nothing."

His students seemed to look awed by the knowledge that Kurenai had a nickname. 'Hopefully this will also help them take things more seriously.' Kurenai was probably the second most recognizable jōnin in the village despite being so young and only a recently promoted one. Genjutsu is an underutilized art for a variety of reasons. Namely that most shinobi tended to identify and dispel genjutsu quickly. So, to be known by her reputation in genjutsu alone was truly impressive. He eye-smiled at them both. "I truly believe that the two of you are capable of achieving great things if you're willing to apply yourselves and work hard."

It was the first time either girl felt that Kakashi was being serious. It was also the first time Kakashi was encouraging them to do something and the first time they felt like he was acting as a teacher should.

Naruto and Hawk appeared outside the Hokage's office. Ordinarily the ANBU would just enter without needing permission, but the Hokage had

been clear that his meeting was of a sensitive nature and did not want information to be known. Thus, the knocking. Naruto wasn't meant to know of the discussions taking place. This would give them the opportunity to compose themselves. They were waiting for a good five minutes before a muffled voice called, "Enter."

Hawk and Naruto stepped into the room. "I have brought Uzumaki, Hokage-sama." Hawk bowed and returned to his position in the shadows right as the Hokage dismissed him.

Hiruzen smiled at Naruto. "Naruto-kun please come in. There are some people I'd like you to meet." He gestured to the empty seat across from Jiraiya and Tsunade.

Naruto bowed and made his way over to the seat. It hurt to see two of his most precious people alive again. When he first walked in and saw Tsunade he had to stop himself from running across the room and tackling her in a hug. He may have kept calling her 'baa-chan' to annoy her but he truly loved her like his own grandmother. They were distantly related, and she was one of the only living relatives she ever got to meet. Her death had been one of the hardest experiences of his life. If it hadn't been for Shikamaru and Shino he might have given up hope, but they kept him from wallowing in the sadness of her passing by reminding him that she only wanted the best for him and for him to be happy. So, he tried his best to be as happy as he could.

Jiraiya was another matter entirely. Naruto loved him. Looked up to him as he imagined he would a father. He cherished every memory he had with Jiraiya. Yet in all the time they spent together Jiraiya had never told him that he was his Godfather. He assumed after he read Jiraiya's first book that he was, a fact his father would later confirm, but to not hear it from the pervert's mouth hurt him. Then to pile on years of abandonment by somebody who was his family. He didn't know if he wanted to punch him in the nuts or squeeze the life out of him. Probably both. But he couldn't do that right now. Maybe not even ever. Things were too different.

Three sets of eyes followed him as he silently moved to sit in the available chair next to the Hokage and across from the Sannin. The owners of the eyes were all lost in their own thoughts. Tsunade saw memories of her brother, Nawaki. Jiraiya saw a young Minato. Hiruzen saw the grandson he had failed repeatedly. Once Naruto was sitting Hiruzen made the introductions. "Naruto these are two of my students, Tsunade and Jiraiya."

Naruto was still trying to recover from seeing the two again. "Hello. It's nice to meet you. I am Uzumaki Naruto." The awkwardness in the room didn't help ease any of his own nervousness at being there.

Hiruzen could tell that Naruto was uncomfortable but not exactly sure why. As far as he knew neither Sannin had met him before now. Still he hoped to spare Naruto some discomfort by keeping things moving. "Jiraiya is here to examine your seal Naruto."

Naruto nodded and started removing his vest and shirt as if he was on autopilot and not really paying attention. Hiruzen watched as he kept sending glances at Tsunade. Naruto was good at maintaining a straight face and not giving things away, but Hiruzen could see a mixture of pain and joy at seeing his only female student. 'Another puzzling mystery you present to me Naruto-kun.' He tried hard not to feel jealous at his student for having his surrogate grandson's affection. It had been a long time since Hiruzen ever felt a hint of that emotion.

Jiraiya watched as Naruto undressed processing what he had already learned. Naruto knew he was a jinchūriki that much was clear. What he didn't know is how he knew. He wasn't supposed to know until Jiraiya had told him. Now that he wasn't just seeing a mini Minato he noticed the red cloth wrapped around his neck and the Uzu headband that sat on the front of it. He knew of his mother. Another thing that Jiraiya was supposed to tell him when he became a chūnin or turned 16 whatever came first. His father had been quite clear on the matter.

Without being told Naruto started channeling his chakra. He closed his eyes to focus and try and reign in his thoughts and feelings. He knew Tsunade and the Hokage had seen him looking at her and could only imagine how expressive his eyes were. Naruto hated that he showed so many of his emotions with his eyes. After years of putting up walls to make people think he was fine his eyes became the only way people could tell what he was feeling. It made it all the harder to hide things from them. He felt Jiraiya kneel in front of him to examine the seal and make sure everything was alright with it.

As Jiraiya was looking over the seal the only thing he could think about was how much of a genius Minato was. He placed his hand on the seal and used his chakra to feel the difference in the seal from the last time he saw it. Even as skilled as he was he couldn't make heads or tails of what Minato was trying to do. All he knew was that the seal was designed so Naruto would absorb a portion of the Kyūbi's chakra, and that the seal slowly weakened over time. Minato had made a key that could be used to retighten the lock, or so Jiraiya thought. He put his hand on the seal and used the key to retighten it seeing that it had loosened slightly. "It's stable sensei. Nothing has changed about it."

Hiruzen nodded to Jiraiya before addressing Naruto. "Thank you for cooperating Naruto-kun. You can get dressed now." Naruto turned around to start putting his clothes back on. It had felt a little awkward standing half dressed in a room with so many people, just so they could look at the seal. "When you're done you can go back to your training my boy." Once he was done getting dressed Naruto continued to just stand there and cast subtle glances at Tsunade. "Is there something on your mind Naruto-kun?"

Naruto was genuinely nervous. He didn't want to pass up the opportunity to be close to Tsunade again. She was the one person in his life who never did anything to him. It was the second healthy relationship he had developed after Shizune, whom he still viewed as his big sister. "Umm..." He took a breath trying to calm himself. "Tsunade-sama." The suffix felt foreign on his tongue. He'd never called her 'sama' before. Tsunade-baa. Baa-chan. Nee-chan one time he had been too drunk to think clearly. But never Tsunade-sama.

Naruto paused longer than he meant to so Tsunade thought he was waiting for her to address him. "What do you want brat?" Tsunade had been a little unnerved by the blonde's behavior toward her. The boy's cerulean blue eyes had been expressing so many emotions toward her that she didn't know what to think of him.

"I was wondering if maybe we could...have dinner or something?" Now that he's said it he felt stupid for asking it in that way. It sounded more like he was asking her out not trying to connect with family.

Tsunade was shocked by the question. This boy, this child, was asking her out. It was highly amusing but a little awkward for everyone in the room if she was reading their faces right. "Come again brat?" Naruto looked at her with an embarrassed look on his face. "Don't take this the wrong way kid. I'm flattered, but you are way too young for me."

This was the reaction he expected but he could still save this...hopefully. "Wait...what? No! Not like *that* sheesh. Like I'd want to date somebody as old as my grandmother. Besides you are way too female for me. Although even I can see that you are still an attractive woman." He had learned long ago that the best way to avoid Tsunade's wrath was to shower her with compliments.

A vein started throbbing on Tsunade's forehead at being called old. "What did you mean then brat." She was choking back her anger...poorly, but the attempt was there. She was glaring angrily at Naruto as she crossed her arms. The rest of the room (Jiraiya) was processing Naruto's admission and left speechless at the current situation unfolding before them.

"Your grandmother was Mito-sama. My mother was an Uzumaki. You're the closest thing I have to family. Well blood family at least." He muttered the last part under his breath, but he was sure people heard him. "I just want to get to know the only living relative I have. I don't know how close or distant we are but that doesn't matter to me. You're family."

He said the last part with such conviction that Tsunade didn't know how to respond. 'This brat is full of surprises.' Declaring her to be family after having just met her. Tsunade was amused by how bold Naruto was being. Most people tended to dance on eggshells around her. The fact that somebody was not was very refreshing. She'd consider it. If only to find out more about this kid. The way he kept looking at her was both intriguing and disturbing. "I'll think about it brat. So long as you're paying, and I can bring a friend."

The way Naruto's eyes lit up with joy at her potential acquiescing made Tsunade pause but part of her was excited at the prospect of family. She may have built up walls around her to keep people away, but that was because she was afraid to lose anything more. Not that she didn't care about anything. The pain of loss was just too familiar to her. "Sure Baa-chan! I don't mind paying and bring whoever you want!"

Another vein started throbbing. "Who are you calling 'baa-chan' gaki?" Tsunade stood and pointed accusingly. The anger was rising once again.

Naruto just smiled at her innocently. "You of course. You're as old as that pervert over there, but you're much prettier to look at! At least you aren't like that old fossil." He pointed at the Hokage. "I wouldn't be surprised if one day we all woke up and heard that the Hokage had simply turned to dust from old age in this office." That had the desired effect of making Tsunade smile. "I mean he belongs in a museum by now!" Now Tsunade was laughing as Hiruzen was pouting. He may accept he's old, but he certainly didn't appreciate being called out on it.

"You're an interesting brat I'll give you that." If she thought Naruto couldn't light up anymore than she was just proven wrong. She sat back down both to show that she was calming and to better observe the blonde-haired boy who went from pushing her buttons to amusing her.

The moment was ruined by Jiraiya who opened his mouth without thinking as he often did. "I'm jealous Hime. The brat's gotten closer to a date with you faster than I have."

Her first instinct was to reintroduce Jiraiya to her fist. An instinct she listened to. Faster than Jiraiya could react, or fail to react, her fist connected with the man's left cheek. She smiled as she sent Jiraiya crashing into the wall behind Hiruzen's desk groaning with pain.

Naruto was equally as amused. "That was awesome!" He pumped his fist into the air. "You're even cooler than I already thought Tsunade-baa!"

Tsunade 'tsk'd' at Naruto. "I can't tell if you're trying to make me hit you or not kid." Naruto shrugged as he turned as if to leave. To her surprise, Naruto ran over and wrapped her in a hug. It lasted only a few seconds before the kid let her go and he ran off, but it left Tsunade and the room stunned yet again. "He's an interesting brat." She kept staring at the door the blonde had exited through thinking about everything that just happened.

"Naruto-kun is indeed interesting. Truthfully I am jealous Tsunade." Both his students turned to look at him at his admission. He couldn't quash the feeling anymore. Seeing Naruto interact with Tsunade had reminded him of how much the boy has changed when it came to their interactions. "There was a time Naruto used to treat me as family. I have lost his trust so to see him give that to you immediately...truly I am surprised." 'And saddened by my own failings.'

This only piqued Tsunade's interest more. "What did you do to him sensei?" She tried her best to read the man who knew absolutely everything about well...everything. Ordinarily he'd be an impassive stone, but when she asked that question she saw so many things. Pain. Anger. Sadness. Regret. Self-loathing. It made her wonder what was causing those feelings.

"It's more what I didn't do for him." Hiruzen could only sigh in despair. "Once you assume your duties you will find out." He leaned back in his chair to stare at the ceiling. "I can only hope that you will be...merciful." Her anger was legendary after all. When she finds out the truth she might just leave again. Or kill him. He didn't know which would be worse.

Tsunade rose her eyebrows and made a note to look up anything and everything about Uzumaki Naruto as soon as possible.

Jiraiya knew what wasn't being said. He knew virtually everything about Naruto's life. The man was honored to be chosen as the boy's godfather, but he never expected to be in a position where he had to be the boy's guardian. He knew nothing of raising children. So, when Minato and Kushina died and with Naruto looking so much like Minato already, Jiraiya ran. It was cowardly and shameful. Adding on everything his sensei told him of the situation trying in vain to get Jiraiya to take him only made it worse.

Finally, the one thing he noticed from his first meeting with Naruto was that the boy never once looked in his direction after introductions. To not even be looked at by Minato's legacy hurt. It shouldn't. He'd made the choice to stay away, and thought he accepted that. 'Evidently not.' Still the way Naruto looked at everyone *except* him was odd. Ordinarily people couldn't help but send him even a passing glance. There wasn't anything that would have said he was the boy's Godfather and only the Hokage was still alive to know that. Yet everything was screaming that the boy knew he was. It was troubling.

Tsunade was equally perturbed by the young blonde, albeit for entirely different reasons. Naruto reminded her of a few of the Uzumaki cousins she was fortunate to meet before the village's untimely demise. Very upfront and direct. Fiercely drawn toward family. Yet parts of him were out of character. He could be loud and boisterous but was initially quiet and reserved. 'And when he first walked in he seemed to want to bolt out of the room.' It was very out of character of what she expected of a supposed cousin.

Most would find differences normal, but with some families that just wasn't the case. 'All Naras are smart and lazy. Senju were hippies, for lack of a better word. Uchiha and Hyūga have immeasurable sticks shoved up their pinched asses. Inuzuka are wild. Akimichi are gluttons. Aburame are quiet and logical. Uzumaki were loud, boisterous, and fiercely loyal of what was theirs.' It's just the way some clans were. When people don't fit the mold perfectly its noticeable. Still something about the boy was drawing her in.

Hiruzen could see both of his students were no longer going to be able to focus. They had done more than he ever thought they would in a single day. He had honestly expected more fighting and resistance. 'Perhaps it hasn't set in yet that they can no longer do as they please.' He had set a course and he was going to stick with it. Even if he had to chop off some limbs to do it. "Why don't you two take some time to reacclimate

yourselves to the village. We've accomplished a lot already. It will take time to gather all the active duty jōnin." Hopefully no longer than a week but who knows. "We shall, all three, meet again a day before that time. Until then you each have things to do." They both moved to leave. Hiruzen felt assured that he made the right call when Jiraiya used the door instead of the window.

Hiruzen stood up from his desk. "Hawk go and fetch Bear for me. Tell him to meet me on the roof." He walked out of the office. "Cancel any appointments for the afternoon." His secretary complied without a hint of protest or questioning. He made his way slowly to the roof. He turned to stare up at his sensei's faces as he waited for Bear to arrive. 'You both died so young and yet accomplished far more than I.'

"You summoned me Hokage-sama." A man in a bear mask appeared silently on the roof behind the elderly Hokage.

Hiruzen kept staring at his predecessors faces lost in thought. "What I'm going to ask of you is unfair and cruel. But it must be done. You have quite the legacy to live up to."

Bear remained stoic as his Kage addressed him. "It's not a standard that could ever be met. They were both geniuses in their own right." Part of him begrudged his ancestors. Not for what they accomplished but because it put enormous pressure on their descendants to live up to them, and that was difficult. Neigh impossible at times. Tsunade was the only one to even come close to matching the Shodai. Nobody had approached the Nidaime's skill with Suiton jutsu. Truly it was impressive what the Nidaime could do. "You ask the impossible Hokage-sama."

Hiruzen nodded but kept his eyes up. By all accounts he was their equal now. In some ways their superior. He had been Hokage longer than both of them combined. Yet he didn't feel he was their equal. He still felt inferior to them both. Which is why he often found himself staring up at them in reverence and as if he was still a child. "As I said. What I ask of you is unfair and cruel, but you must do it."

Bear could only sigh. "I am trying Hokage-sama, but I am not Nidaime-sama. I can't even hold a candle in comparison. How he managed such mastery of Suiton jutsu I do not know. I believe I'm skilled to be sure but its hard to live up to that kind of legend." Not for lack of trying. He always tried his hardest.

Hiruzen turned to look at the man. "Remove your mask." Bear flinched at the order. There was only one time the Hokage would order you to remove your mask. He didn't want to do that yet. "Your time in the darkest shadows is over. You are no longer Bear." The masked man could only nod and remove his mask as ordered. "You are Senju Hideki once more. I am sorry to cut short such a promising career in ANBU. I am curious though as to why you wanted to join the first place?"

ANBU had been both an escape and an opportunity for Hideki. An escape from the constant watch and eyes of people who expected the next legendary Senju, and an opportunity to become that legend. Paradoxical. "It seemed the best way to hone my skills Hokage-sama. One cannot improve without challenges."

Hiruzen nodded and allowed his eyes to take in the face of the man before him. "You look very much like him you know." Hideki didn't respond he had grown accustomed to people seeing his great-grand uncles in him. "Were your hair not more like the Nidaime's you would be his spitting image."

Hideki could only laugh. "Then I am grateful I have his hair. I do not wish to be compared to Shodai-sama. Being compared to Nidaime-sama is hard enough." It really annoyed Hideki that he was almost a carbon copy of Hashirama sans the hair. The same eyes. The same face. The same everything. It made him feel all the more worthless when he failed to live up to the expectations that were piled on him. As a child he even took to dying his hair orange if only to avoid being compared to one of the greatest legends in history. "Perhaps I will take a page from Kakashi and adopt a face mask." The less people look at him and hope to see Hashirama the better of he'll be.

"Ha! Perhaps its because of age but I cannot for the life of me remember a time Kakashi's face was not covered." Hiruzen honestly couldn't recall a time when Kakashi didn't have a mask of some sort covering his face. The boy had been usually gifted and talented as a child that the mask was probably as old as him. "I've heard it whispered that Kakashi was in fact born with a mask already on his face." Hiruzen wouldn't put it past the man to leave the womb wearing a mask. "In any case I have two long-term missions for you Hideki."

The ANBU mask may have been gone but not the obedience or loyalty. Hideki dropped to a knee before his leader. "I am yours to command Hokage-sama."

Hiruzen turned back to look up at the Shodai's and Nidaime's faces. "I hope one of these will be less of a mission and more of an opportunity to connect with family. I want you to spend time with your cousin. She has returned for good this time and I plan to make her Hokage. She will be stubborn and resist any attempt at giving her the post. She will take it. There is no better option."

"Understood Hokage-sama." Hideki turned thoughtful as he waited for additional orders. He had never met his cousin. She had been long gone by the time he was old enough to remember people's faces. Not to mention that the Senju had once been a large clan and not everybody knew everybody even if they were family. Now it was only him, his dying mother, and Tsunade. The rest were all dead. It was another thing piled on him. Neither Tsunade nor his mother could have children. Which left him as the one responsible for keeping the clan alive.

Hiruzen's thoughts mirrored his subordinate's. "Your second task is to train your Suiton jutsu beyond reason. As much as I'd like you to achieve the same level of skill as Tobirama-sensei did, I will settle for you being more skilled than those from Mizu no Kuni." It was still an unreasonable request, but it was more reasonable than trying to replicate the Nidaime. "That is all I have for you at this time Hideki."

"Hai. Hokage-sama." He rose and bowed once more before disappearing in a swirl of leaves. There wasn't much he had to get done. Once he was seen without his mask, 'Which I most likely was already,' word would quickly spread through the ranks. The only thing he'd have to do is give up the bear mask when a messenger appeared. He stared intently at the mask and the blank eyes stared right back. 'I guess they were right. There has never been a bear that lasted in ANBU.' Every bear before him had been killed, maimed, or forced to leave ANBU. Hideki was just the latest bear to fail.

'I should be grateful to have worn the mask at all.' Hideki was under no illusion. He knew exactly why he had been given a mask so fast, and it wasn't because of his ancestry. Hideki had done right by a blonde-haired child and the Hokage had been grateful. Most rookies spent years with a blank mask before they are allowed to actually join the ranks. Some resented him. He had cost the black ops nearly a full team of shinobi. Horse and his squad had been punished severely and then dropped off the map. Except him. He had been rewarded with a new mask, a cursed mask, but a new mask all the same. Some felt betrayed by him and made their displeasure known.

He didn't know how to go about carrying out either of his missions. Tsunade was said to have a volatile temper and in general just an unpleasant

person to be around these days. He felt like he had taken his Suito as far as he could. He simply didn't have the control and reserves to pull water molecules out of the air to supplant his jutsu with. Plants he could do to a point it was functional, but the air was another matter entirely. Sometimes there were obstacles that just couldn't be conquered. Nevertheless, he had his orders, so he had to try.

"Welcome back Naruto. Enjoy your visit with the Hokage?" If Kakashi was expecting anything other than a shrug he didn't show it. "Well its good you're back." He turned to address the other genin standing behind him. "As I was saying. We have decided that its time for you guys to start taking missions." He eye-smiled at them as two of his students seemed excited. "So, let's head over to the mission office and see what they have to offer." Although if he had his way he already knew which mission he'd be taking first. It was the one that promised the most amusement for him.

Ino and Sakura may have been excited at the prospect of doing missions, but Naruto and Shino knew better. Fresh genin doing missions could mean only one thing for them. D-rank missions. In other words...chores. They weren't hard missions, unless you happened to be a jinchūriki, but they were tedious and mind numbingly boring. Although Shino would say to himself that the 'capture Tora' mission was the least boring. The cat may be a demon in disguise, but it certainly made things interesting. Knowing Kakashi as they did they assumed he'd pick the damn cat for their first mission.

The trip through the village was long. Or at least it felt that way as Ino and Sakura kept blathering away about the upcoming missions and wondering what they'd be like. Still the mission discussion was preferable because invariably they ended up on the topic of a certain brooding duck-butt asshole. Or so Naruto called him in his head. Naruto and Shino moved to the other side of Kakashi to put some semblance of a barrier between them and the squealing girls. It wasn't effective as sound carries, but it made them feel better.

Kakashi was also feeling their pain. He didn't understand fangirls, or their constant obsession with members of the Uchiha clan. Almost every male member of the Uchiha at one point had a gaggle of fangirls following them. Except for Obito. Even the Uchiha had black sheep. Thinking of Obito made him hate himself even more than he already did. He took out his trusty orange book to mask his self-loathing.

Sasuke was a sore spot for Kakashi. He so desperately wanted to help Obito's last living relative but had no idea how to do it. Sasuke was very much a younger version of Kakashi which wasn't good. The path he had set for himself would ultimately be his undoing and lead to his ruin. Yet Sasuke was too consumed by his own grief to notice he was on the path to becoming the very thing he hates most. Kakashi refocused on his little orange book to banish the troubling thoughts away. It was easier much easier to deal with Jiraiya's writing. He also hoped he could drown out the pointless drabble of two young girls. 'Silly Miyuki-chan, Natsu-chan doesn't like you that way!'

While the girls were distracting themselves with various fantasies involving the Uchiha. Naruto and Shino were thinking of their own agendas. Shino needed a way to get people asking questions that wouldn't be overly suspicious. A difficult task in a shinobi village. No doubt reports were made of missing children but the bureaucracy at the time for internal matters centered around the Uchiha, and Shino doubted very much that it was changed so quickly. He had no doubt that numerous documents were misplaced around the time of the massacre. He would just have to find some.

Shino often wondered why the police force was never restarted. It was useful to keep the military and police separate even if it was a marginal separation. The Hokage may be the ultimate authority of all things but it provided comfort to all that the military and police were separate institutions, despite the fact they were both comprised of shinobi. Of course, the police was exclusively made of Uchiha shinobi which didn't help the clan's position any. Their de facto status as peacekeepers prevented them from taking part in missions outside the borders of Hi no Kuni. Most of their assignments took place in Konohagakure, excursions outside the village were rare. The Uchiha viewed their position as one of distrust since they weren't allowed to go on missions outside the village, and other members of the shinobi forces saw it was special privilege that they alone were responsible for internal security.

Shino shook his head getting back on track. The records existed...somewhere. He'd just have to find one. Then it was simply a matter of time before it snowballed into a problem that couldn't be ignored. Knowing Danzō as many records as feasible would have been removed or altered in the event somebody started asking questions. If he focused on information about Torune he stood a better chance at finding inconsistencies. Torune was a rare Aburame and therefore his records weren't easy to tamper with. It was likely nobody bothered to look at his records since his disappearance. It wasn't much but it was a place to start.

Naruto was thinking about what to do about Sasuke. A question he was unable to escape, despite traveling through time. Sasuke is still his problem to deal with. He couldn't just tell him the truth. That would draw too much attention to himself. Not to mention Sasuke would probably just end up hating the village again anyway. That was ultimately the problem with him. Sasuke didn't *want* to stop hating. Hate is the only thing he had left, and he was going to cling to it like a newborn babe to their mother's breast. Neither could he just let things play out like they had before and expect a better result.

As much as Naruto respected Itachi's sacrifice he let his entire plan rest on something remaining a secret even after the involvement of men he knew would take advantage of the situation. In short for all his genius Itachi was a dumb ass. Nothing stays secret forever. Naruto still couldn't fathom how Itachi thought forcing his brother to hate him was the best way to handle the situation. In trying to prevent Konoha's destruction he brought about its greatest threat.

Naruto couldn't understand what Itachi was after. He still questioned why Itachi took the blame. It made absolutely no sense for him to take the blame for the massacre of the entire clan. Danzō and Obito were both opportunistic people and they couldn't possibly resist the temptation. Something not Itachi's fault. Naruto could only surmise that Itachi felt responsible for all their deaths. Which was guiding him toward his own death at Sasuke's hand. Not that Sasuke would ever be powerful enough to defeat Itachi on his own. Even after everything Sasuke only won because Itachi was sick and not really trying to kill his brother.

So how to deal with Sasuke? Telling the truth was out. Killing him was out. 'For the time being at least.' Doing nothing wasn't an option. Preventing him from going to Orochimaru was the best option they had at the moment. At least in the village he can be confined and controlled. Contrary to popular opinion Uchiha Sasuke is not allowed to do as he pleases. Since Orochimaru was already a target for his upcoming invasion it was a way to kill two birds with one stone. Not that killing Orochimaru would be easy. So long as a single curse seal existed Orochimaru could come back. Hunting them all down would be time consuming, but necessary.

He was once again walking into the tower only this time to retrieve what would be his "first" mission as a shinobi. Had he still been his naïve younger self he might be excited, but nothing made D-rank missions exciting. Except torturing genin, but it had been war and there had been no opportunities to be a sensei. Then he became Hokage shortly after the conclusion of the war so no genin students of his own.

The group of five walked into the tower and proceeded toward the mission office. Naruto was once again standing before the Hokage. Kakashi

bowed and the rest of the group followed suit. Kakashi stood straight. "Good day Hokage-sama Team..." He wasn't quite sure what team he should give. Technically speaking they weren't a team. Just a mismatched group of genin. He shrugged. "is not that important. We're here for our first mission Hokage-sama!" He tried to sound as energetic as he could, but the only thing he was looking forward to was the looks of disappointment and frustration from the genin.

The Hokage smiled and start rifling through the pile of mission requests on the desk before him. "Ah yes good to see you Kakashi. Now let's see what we have available." The Hokage reached for the closest scroll. "We have painting the fence around the Shinobi Academy. Walking the dogs in the Inuzuka kennels, babysitting one of the councilor's children..." Naruto tuned the Hokage out waiting for Kakashi to choose the mission.

Kakashi was distraught. None of his students were freaking out about the D-Rank missions. It just wasn't right. Genin were supposed to complain about having to do chores. 'Didn't they get the memo! This is the most enjoyable part for jōnin-sensei!' Not a single reaction from any of them. Their lack of reaction was really more worrying for Kakashi. 'There's still hope...once they're doing the missions surely they'll complain! Right?' His internal monologue ended right about the same time the Hokage got to the Tora mission. "We'll take that one Hokage-sama!" Kakashi nearly ran forward to grab the scroll as if afraid another team would come and take it.

Sakura and Ino were concerned by Kakashi's behavior especially when he started rambling to himself about genin and D-Ranks. They didn't understand why Kakashi seemed to be going crazy. Naruto and Shino along with most of the room were amused by Kakashi's behavior. Jōnin-sensei loved to torture their genin with D-Ranks...at least when they first started out. After a while even that would get old. They all followed a still mumbling Kakashi out of the office. Once outside Kakashi regained control of himself. "Okay team. Our mission today is simple. Help find a lost cat and return it to sweet lady!" He eye-smiled innocently at the genin. "Good luck." He then disappeared in a **Shunshin (Body Flicker)**. 'Time to enjoy their suffering.'

"Typical." Naruto wasn't surprised at Kakashi's sudden departure. Not that he really left. He was on the roof of a building fifty meters away. Sakura or Ino wouldn't notice him and it was close enough for him to monitor them. There was no point in pointing him out. Shino already knew, and Sakura and Ino either wouldn't believe him or wouldn't care. 'This is going to be such a drag.' Naruto never liked chasing after this cat.

The first couple times he did it he did so without complaint...mostly. Eventually Naruto threatened to skin the cat alive, so he was forbidden from ever taking it again. Can't just threaten the Daimyō's wife's cat and get away with it. Had he known that all he had to do to never chase the cat again was threaten to kill it he would have done it sooner. Thankfully he had learned and more importantly he had a plan to make his life easier, and mess with Kakashi and all the other jōnin and genin. 'It's been too long since I've done a good prank!'

Ino and Sakura seemed lost and confused by Kakashi's sudden departure. He was their leader and was supposed to lead. That required his presence. At least as far as they were concerned. They completely overlooked Naruto's remark that this was normal. "What are we supposed to do now?" Sakura was the first to express their concerns at being left alone on a mission.

Naruto snorted. "What do you think? We carry out our mission." He really had forgotten how much he disliked the old Sakura. She couldn't think for herself. Take care of herself. Or really do anything for herself. Always needing someone to hold her hand through everything. 'I have no idea what baa-chan did to her, but she needs to do it again...and soon.' Although he had to admit that at least this Sakura was slightly better, but even then, it wasn't because she wanted to be but because she had to be. Kurenai, Asuma, Gai, and Kakashi were forcing her to improve. She still didn't want anything for herself. Other than Sasuke.

Sakura hardened her eyes and glared at Naruto. "I know that baka! I was asking what we should do now!" Since she was still easily angered and influenced by her emotions Sakura tried to hit Naruto on the head. Her attacks were still slow, sloppy, and left her open to easy counters. Not that Naruto would hit her. He just kept avoiding her strikes which only served to increase Sakura's anger. "Stay still damn it!"

"Do you really expect your opponents to stay still so you can hit them? That hardly makes sense." He kept dodging and deflecting her punches. It was obvious she was starting to tire. A couple more attempts at swinging and Sakura was panting as she stood in front of Naruto.

Ino took this opportunity to cut in. "Look let's just do this dumb mission and get on with the rest of our day." She didn't feel like putting up with Naruto any longer than she had to. "We should split up and try to find this dumb cat. It shouldn't be too hard."

"Splitting up is not wise. Why? Because we lack any means to communicate over long distances." Shino and Naruto knew catching Tora would take a team effort, but they didn't. Without them at least. Even if they did catch Tora then the others would spend potentially hours wasting time.

"I don't care what you think. This is what I said we should do so we're doing it!" There was nothing Ino hated more than not getting her way. She was stubborn that way. She started walking away while dragging Sakura with her.

Naruto and Shino shrugged. "Suit yourself." Naruto created two shadow clones to follow them. He turned to Shino "Come on Shino let's find that cat." With a simple nod Shino unleashed his insects to try and locate Tora.

Kakashi could only sigh. 'Why is every team I'm apart of always such a cluster fuck?' He created a shadow clone to follow the girls much like Naruto had before following after the boys himself.

With the girls...

Sakura let out a cry of frustration. "Gah, I hate him!" Ino knew she meant Naruto and not Shino. Although she thought Shino was worse than Naruto because he liked bugs. Disgusting creatures. She remained silent to let Sakura vent her anger and frustration. "Why does he always have to get in the way of everything!?"

Sakura's anger against the blonde seemed to not make sense most of the time. As far as she knew Naruto had very little to do with Sakura so her friend/rival's anger toward him didn't seem genuine. "What do you mean by that Sakura?"

Sakura looked at Ino anger still clearly present on her face. "Ever since I've known him he's done nothing but cause problems for me and my family!" Sakura started remembering about the early days in the Academy. "First, he's loud, obnoxious, and constantly annoying me by asking me out." Even though Naruto hadn't done that in nearly two years. "Then there's always trying to stage up Sasuke-kun as if I'm some prize that can be won." The irony of the statement given that's exactly how she and Ino treat Sasuke. As nothing but an object to be fight over and won. "Not to mention my mom says he's nothing but a troublemaker and the reason she lost her job."

This was the first Ino was hearing of all of this. "What do you mean?"

Sakura scoffed. "I don't know exactly but my mom had to resign from the village council a couple years back, around the same time that Naruto disappeared from the Academy again. She wouldn't tell me what happened, but she kept insisting that it was all Naruto's fault." A lot of her mother's friends had been sent to prison, exiled, or executed for something. She had overheard her parents talking a lot about it at the time. Not everything, but enough to know something happened and that Naruto was somehow involved. "After that my mom just told me to stay away from Naruto, that he was nothing but trouble." Not that she ever said anything else about Naruto in the first place.

Ino wasn't surprised by that. Her parents had often warned her to be careful around Naruto, but they would never say why. They never said he was a bad person just that she should be wary of him, and that under no circumstances was she to ever use the **Shintenshin no Jutsu (Mind Body Switch Technique)** on him. Ino didn't question them too hard and when Naruto started behaving like a troublemaker she just assumed that they didn't want her associating with somebody like that. Naruto wasn't winning her over by constantly harassing Sasuke either.

"Then there's childish pranks of his. Honestly when is he going to grow up?" The pranks had stopped years ago and yet Sakura seemed convinced they still happened. "I mean sure sometimes they were funny like when he removed all the nails and screws in Mizuki-sensei's chair which held together right until he sat down." It made her laugh internally thinking about it. "But then there's other times where he just does the stupidest or most disrespectful thing possible! Like he doesn't have a care in the world. I don't know why I expect him to have any manners though. Kami knows he wasn't raised right."

"You're just going to have to try harder to ignore him Sakura. Even if he's goading you." Ino didn't really get Sakura's dislike of Naruto as a lot of the things she complained about don't happen anymore. "If you keep attacking him the way you are it'll be you in trouble, not him." She thought it a little cruel of Sakura to blame Naruto for not being raised properly. Not that she'd chastise her friend for it. 'It's not like Naruto ever wanted to be well behaved anyway.' She still thought of him as a troublemaker but she was struggling to remember the last time Naruto had done anything like Sakura was describing.

Sakura sighed. "I know. It's just so hard when I have to be around him so much." The mood was melancholic now and Sakura found it odd to be talking about this with Ino. Their friendship hadn't really survived their rivalry over Sasuke. Sakura felt confident that Ino would use Sakura's problems with Naruto as a way to sweep in and steal Sasuke from her. **'As if Sasuke would ever go for that pig. CHA!'** Sakura didn't understand that it wasn't normal for a person to hear another voice in their head, so she didn't question or complain about the aggressive side of her rearing its head. Nothing more was said as they walked in silence with no real plan in mind.

Sakura's mother stressed the importance of remaining ladylike at all times. She also stressed how important it was for her to win over Sasuke. Now more than ever. If she could marry into the Uchiha clan it would boost the entire family's standing in the village. When Sakura had told her mother about Gai's dietary requirements and the physical training she would be doing the woman promptly laid into Gai when he came by to see Sakura after the first day.

The Haruno family had just been sitting down for dinner when there was a series of firm knocks on the door. Sakura watched her mother as she moved to answer the door. "Some people have no manners. Honestly to come by at this time knowing full well families are going to be sitting down for the evening meal." The comment was accompanied with a rude tone and a disbelieving head shake.

She opened the door to the most hideous site in the world. A man with black hair in a bowl cut wearing an atrocious form fitting green spandex suit. "Good evening Haruno-san." Gai bowed to her. "I apologize for the lateness of my visit, but I am running behind delivering these to the genin." He held out a piece of paper to her.

Mebuki knew as soon as he opened the door that this was the man who was trying to turn her daughter into some muscle freak of a woman. 'Not that that's surprising given how he's dressed. I mean honestly!' She took the paper from Gai's hand and started reading over it. The more she read the more she didn't like it. 'Well this just won't do at all. Sakura has to maintain a feminine figure to attract a suitable husband. The physical demands you're asking for will ruin that figure she has meticulously worked for. Not to mention you're demanding she eat way too many calories. A woman does not eat nearly 4000 calories a day!' They barely ate the recommended 2000 calories a day as far as Mebuki was concerned.

"Forgive me Haruno-san I was not aware you were as familiar as I am with what's best for a developing shinobi." Gai's tone held no venom or anger, just annoyance. 'I really hope they add a few lectures on proper nutrition because this is just ridiculous. A civilian lecturing a shinobi on proper diet and physical fitness.'

They entered into a staring match that lasted far too long and made things even more awkward than they already were. Gai however had other matters to tend to so he gave in first. "I cannot force Sakura to do anything." Which wasn't entirely true. As a jōnin-sensei Gai could go to the Hokage and argue that the girl's parents were having a detrimental effect on the girl and have her removed from their home. Now that she was a shinobi Sakura had significantly less freedom than she realized. "It's on her to decide to follow my recommendations or not." He bowed again. Arguing was pointless anyway. The way Sakura was now she'd never survive the training the genin were going to be put through.

Once Gai had gone, Mebuki ripped up the paper with Gai's recommendations and promptly threw it into the trash. "You hear that sweetheart? He knows he can't force you to do anything. You just stick with your diet and you'll be Uchiha Sakura soon enough!" She smiled at her daughter who smiled back. Once she married into the Uchiha she would retire and become a typical housewife. 'As was proper of a lady of such a noble family.'

Sakura had tried hard to stick to her diet but quickly found she couldn't. The training they were doing was much more intense than the Academy. She wasn't sure if all of her sensei were all trying to sabotage her attempts at wooing the Uchiha or just didn't care. Either way she felt they were all against her. The way they looked at her with annoyance or disappointment at having to scale back everything lest she be left behind also upset her. Once she gave in and started eating properly things got marginally better, but all the sensei continued to look at her skeptically. Or so she thought at least.

Ino took out the mission scroll. They hadn't actually looked at it and now that they were wandering the village she realized she had no idea what the cat even looked like. "Let's see here." She the cat's description aloud for Sakura's benefit. "Tora. Cat. Brown fur, amber eyes, line marking running down her forehead with three perpendicular lines crossing, and a red ribbon on her right ear. Well that sounds pretty unique. This will be a piece of cake." She smiled at Sakura as she put the scroll back in her pocket.

Sakura nodded and smiled back. "And since we have the mission scroll those two don't know what the cat looks like. They'll never find her. Heck since we have to do all the work the money should be split between us." Sakura immediately started thinking of Naruto's misfortune of not getting paid. 'Serves you right you blonde-haired idiot.' They both kept walking and looking around for any cats.

It was naïve of her to think that mission pay would be altered simply by who did what amount of work. The pay had already been divided. The village took the largest cut. Then the jōnin-sensei. Finally, the payment was divided evenly between the genin. Most jōnin-sensei opted not to take any of the money from D-ranks, but some didn't. Well they couldn't choose to not take the money they just quietly deposited it into their genin's account.

As they were walking through the village they weren't having any luck finding a trace of Tora. They found plenty of cats but none of them matched the description they had. To make matters worse when they asked people about said cat they would either laugh or offer them looks of pity and condolences. It really confused them.

Eventually Ino asked why everybody laughed when they said they were looking for Tora. Then they learned that Tora had a reputation as a monstrous feline that was an expert at eluding the teams sent to capture her. The current record for the fastest time to catch Tora was three hours and 43 minutes. Tora usually had the genin running ragged around the village and was only ever really "caught" after the cat gave up or the genin collapsed from exhaustion. It was not welcoming news.

'Great and because the two bozos went off by themselves Ino and I have to work twice as hard!' She was going to get so sweaty and gross. 'But if I set a new record then Sasuke will have to notice me!' Her motivation returned she started searching for Tora with more gusto. Ino just resigned herself to the realization this wouldn't be as simple a mission as she thought.

They would spend the better part of the next hour looking in vain for the damn cat. "There you both are. Come on we've got the dumb cat let's head back to the mission office." Naruto, Shino, and Kakashi were walking up to them. Naruto was carrying a small cage and in it was a brown cat with a red ribbon.

Ino and Sakura were flabbergasted. They had only left the office a little over an hour ago. Not only that Naruto and Shino couldn't possibly know what the cat looked like. She still had the scroll in her pocket. 'What the hell is going on!'

Ino's shout wasn't as internal as she thought. "What? We were told to find the cat, so we found it." Naruto shrugged. "It wasn't that hard really, Tora-chan is such a nice kitty!"

"Bu...but how did you know what she looked like?" Sakura was equally as confused as Ino. She was also annoyed at apparently being shown up by the blonde...again.

Naruto took Tora out of the cage and held her in his arms as she started to purr in contentment. "Simple. I looked for a cat that looked like it had an owner. Most cats on the street will be emaciated, grimy, and look like they're about to keel over and die. If it's a pet it will be the opposite." Naruto started toying with Tora's ribbon. "Plus, she has this cute red ribbon on her ear!" Tora seemed to purr louder at the comment.

It made some sort of sense to them both. Though they didn't entirely believe that. There could be plenty of lost cats, or cats that look cared for that really aren't. Still why look a gift horse in the mouth? Ino shrugged as Sakura looked at her confused and asking what to do. Ino walked over to join the group and Sakura followed. "How'd you catch her anyway?"

Naruto stopped and looked at her. "Oh! That was the easiest part! You see it..." He took a dramatic pause as the two girls leaned in interested by the tone of his voice. "A secret." He whispered the last part and laughed as the two girls fell on their faces.

Sakura just glared at him before crossing her arms. "Whatever let's just go finish this stupid mission." She started walking angrily off toward the tower intent on getting paid and going home as fast as possible.

Kakashi was both amused and annoyed by his male blonde-haired student. Amused because the way he had captured Tora would surely cause distress for many other genin. Annoyed because his enjoyment of watching his genin chase Tora was ripped away from him. 'There's still plenty other chōr...I mean D-Rank missions for them to do! It's not over yet...' He just kept thinking about Naruto's encounter with Tora.

"I have found her." Naruto and Shino had been patiently waiting for one of Shino's insects to find Tora. Naruto nodded and motioned for Shino to lead the way. The insects were leading them to training ground 3. When they got there, they saw Tora resting atop one of the wooden posts that Kakashi liked to tie people to. She appeared to be napping while basking in the warmth from the sun.

Despite arriving silently Tora seemed aware of their presence and seemed ready to bolt until Naruto called out. "Wait!" To Kakashi's surprise the cat did indeed wait. "Let's make a deal Tora." That cat tilted its head and meowed as if asking 'What kind of deal?' "It's simple really. How'd you like to walk up walls and across water?" The cat sat down and flung its tail about waiting for more. "Imagine being chased by a bunch of genin and you running to the center of the lake."

Kakashi could only look on in abject horror as the cat nodded its head and stalked toward Naruto and Shino. Clearly it was interested in learning. "There's only one catch Tora." Tora flicked her tail across Naruto's nose. "If I or my friend Shino here," he gestured toward Shino before pulling out a picture from somewhere Kakashi couldn't see, "or this pineapple-haired goof are sent after you, then you let us capture you and take you back. Deal?" Kakashi watched as they all sat patiently waiting for the verdict. Tora nodded her head once and Naruto smiled. "Wonderful. Follow us."

Kakashi spent the next hour watching Naruto and Shino teach Tora how to walk on water. Just like that Tora had been captured and his fun ruined. It was the first time Naruto had seen somebody beside himself or an Inuzuka successfully communicate and teach a cat to use chakra to walk across water. He was impressed, and annoyed. 'I'm sure I'll be blamed for this somehow.'

Kakashi opened the door to the mission office. "Team..." He still hadn't come up with a name and it was actually becoming a bit of a nuisance. "Shinrinkura? To deliver lost cat Tora." The entire room was looking at him in disbelief for a multitude of reasons. "What?"

Naruto's eyebrow was twitching. "Did you just combine all our names to say that?" When Kakashi shrugged Naruto took a huge breath and held it for a few seconds. "Okay. I'm good."

The Hokage was still in the office and was surprised to see Team *that* back so soon. "Well done." He motioned for one of the chūnin in the room to get Madam Shijimi. "I am very interested to hear how your team found Tora so quickly Kakashi. They've absolutely demolished the old record by more than an hour." Hiruzen was sure to note that Tora was still purring contentedly in Naruto's arm as the boy soothingly pet her.

Kakashi nodded. "Well you see Hokage-sama..." He trailed off trying to decide how he could save himself. "I think this is a good opportunity for my students to learn the joys of report writing!" He eye-smiled as he made a show of trying to decide who would do it. "Naruto. This one is all yours."

Naruto knew full well what Kakashi was doing and didn't begrudge the man. He just nodded and handed Tora to Shino before taking out a blank scroll and sitting down to write. To everybody's amazement Tora didn't bolt right out of Naruto's hands and seemed even more content with Shino than she did Naruto.

"Oh my dear sweet Tora-chan! There you are." A rather plump woman wearing way too much make-up ran into the room and scooped Tora up out of Shino's arms and proceeded to smush the cat against her cheek. "You have to stop doing this Tora-chan...I was so sad and worried that I lost you." Those unfamiliar with Tora could only feel some sympathy for the cat at being smothered and immediately understood why it constantly runs away and is so difficult to catch. The woman stopped mauling the cat long enough to reach into her purse and pulling out a stack of money. "Here you go Hiruzen. A job well done like usual."

Hiruzen took the money. "A pleasure as always Shijimi-dono." The woman nodded and walked out. He was about to dismiss Kakashi and his team until Naruto had seemingly finished his report. "Finished already are you?" The boy nodded and continued to hold the report out. He took it and unrolled it to examine its contents. He was impressed. He had seasoned jōnin who didn't bother to fill out their reports accurately or tended to write long narratives of every waking moment. Naruto's was short sweet and to the point. "And what exactly do you mean by 'I made a deal with Tora.'?"

Naruto shrugged. "Its simple. I made a deal with her. The nature of that deal is between us." He closed his eyes and crossed his arms. The message was clear.

Hiruzen wanted to sigh but he didn't. "Very well. I will see to it the pay is deposited in each of your accounts." He turned his gaze toward Kakashi. "Now then, I assume you would like another missions Kakashi?" The man nodded somewhat frantically. "Very well then. Here is what we have to choose from..."

I feel like I should stop here for now. Sorry it took so long and this is what you got, but it is what it is. I've finally made up my mind on whether or not I'll be going to Wave Country. Guess you'll just have to wait and see!

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

A/N: Well it happened...I'm kinda disappointed in myself for doing it but I'm just such a Zabuza fanboy. I guess you can figure out what's going to happen moving forward. Why did I have to like Zabuza...he really wasn't anything special. Looking back, he was one of the weakest enemies Naruto encountered despite his fearsome reputation. Of course, then he was edo tensei'd and he got a power buff but then the Seven Ninja Swordsmen were meant to operate as a single unit. At least in my mind. I just couldn't resist the temptation...I'm sorry for my weakness.

If you don't like the way and what I'm writing all I can say is stop reading. I know I'm not a great writer. I think I'm shit. A fact I've been pretty upfront about. I'll write this story the way I want to and that goes for the characters as well.

Great news! I still don't own Naruto. The legacy is safe.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Chapter 9 – Finally Its Almost Time For A Real Mission!

Uchiha Sasuke was not in a good mood. Not that he had ever been in a good mood since the incident. However, at the moment his lack of joviality stems from his so-called sensei and teammates. Right now they were on a mission. 'Pfft. One can hardly call these chores a mission.' It was relatively simple, weed a garden. Of course, having never done any such work before Sasuke had difficulty differentiating weeds from plants. Thus forcing Naruto and Ino to replant nearly half of what he had pulled up. Assuming what he carelessly pulled up could be saved.

This was not what bothered him about the mission. As far as he was concerned the two of them were beneath him, so it only made sense they know about what he viewed as useless information. No what bothered him was the lack of challenge on all the missions he had taken so far and the training he had been given. At first when he heard that not one but four jōnin would be supervising his training, even if they had eleven other students, he had been happy. Four jōnin meant his training and strength would grow exponentially. It didn't. Instead he felt like he was regressing. A month of being a shinobi and he was no closer to killing *that man*.

The focus of many of the training sessions were useless to him. Sasuke didn't mind the taijutsu and physical training, but he didn't care about teamwork, genjutsu, or chakra control at all. They wouldn't help him get strong enough to kill *that man*. Sasuke hated Kakashi the most. The man was supposedly going to be responsible for teaching them new ninjutsu and yet all he had done was focus on improving everyone's chakra control. It annoyed Sasuke because every time he was met with the same answer. *"I'm not going to teach you anything new until you've mastered what you already have."* He didn't understand what his sensei's problem was. He had mastered each technique he could use and demonstrated that. Yet Kakashi still refused.

The real problem Sasuke was having, that he either was oblivious to or refused to acknowledge, was that he was no longer the favorite. In the Academy it had always been about him. About making Uchiha Sasuke into the best shinobi possible. Now he was having to deal with not being so special. Not being the best at everything. He actually had to deal with the fact that he was bad at some things. He may not understand what he's feeling but he definitely understands the feelings of being shown up by those beneath him. Hence his perpetual anger and silent fury.

In the Academy he had been the best at taijutsu. Very rarely could anybody successfully land a hit on Sasuke. Except for Naruto, but Sasuke ignored all the times Naruto beat him. In fact once it became apparent Naruto would beat Sasuke in a spar they stopped pairing them up together. Now Lee and Neji would trounce Sasuke in taijutsu. 'Once I get my Sharingan I'll put those two back in their place.' He didn't really mind the Hyūga beating him. It still bothered him but to less of an extent than when Lee won. As far as Sasuke was concerned the Hyūga, being an old and noble clan like his, was allowed to challenge him, but Lee being an orphan was not.

Sasuke tried to maintain his superiority in ninjutsu. Namely because he actually had the benefit of knowing anything beyond the Academy three. It wasn't long before he realized he wasn't the best here either. Kakashi had had all the genin show him any jutsu that they were capable of. Sasuke couldn't ignore the fact that Naruto had a far more impressive jutsu repertoire. Worse still because Naruto apparently had a Kekai Genkai Sasuke wouldn't be able to copy it when he awakened his Sharingan. It was infuriating that another clan-less orphan was outshining him and doubly insulting because he had awakened his bloodline.

Most of the genin in the group were clan children, heirs to boot, so they all had some ninjutsu under their belt. Except for TenTen, Lee, and Sakura. This was another of Kakashi's reasons for focusing on chakra control for the time being. The point he was trying to make was to get them to see that the better control you have over your chakra the more powerful your jutsu become. Better control means less chakra consumed potentially prolonging your ability to fight as opposed to your opponent. Kakashi eventually planned to teach some ninjutsu but not until they all accepted the importance of control. Or they were going on a mission outside the village. Whatever comes first.

Ironically despite having no interest in genjutsu this is where Sasuke was the best. Since the Academy only taught the theory behind genjutsu Sasuke was above his peers in knowing how to use a few genjutsu. His clan, before the incident, had taught him a few genjutsu that would be augmented and made better with his Sharingan. Since *that man* had the Sharingan as well genjutsu would ultimately be useless. Or so Sasuke thought. There were several high ranking genjutsu that required massive amounts of chakra to execute that could work against dōjutsu. The Uchiha and the Hyūga just kept that a closely guarded secret. Most shinobi wrongfully believe that genjutsu only targets the eyes. There were auditory, olfactory, and tactile genjutsu, but they were so difficult to create and use that they might as well have been nonexistent. They were also the most powerful of genjutsu if done right.

Still Sasuke was not where he wanted to be. He needed the power to kill *that man* and his many 'sensei' weren't giving it to him, but there was only

so much he could learn on his own. He was at a loss of what to do. He didn't think he could realistically get strong enough to kill *him* on his own. As much as he hated to admit it he needed help. His pride prevented him from asking for it. 'They should be offering me power not making me beg!' Sasuke would never *ask* for anything. He was an Uchiha and Uchiha do not ask for power.

He was so consumed by his own thoughts that he didn't realize he and his 'team' had finished their mission and were now walking through the village. Sasuke never acknowledged the respect and deference people showed him whenever he walked by, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't relish it. Today however he noticed there were different looks being sent in his direction. Not at him but in the vicinity. It didn't take him long to figure out they were being directed toward the male blonde in his company. Determining that he was not the target of their insulting glares he no longer cared.

Even so, just as quickly as he noticed them they looked away as if frightened. Glancing about he noticed that each person or group would look away after Kakashi sent his own glare their way. 'Interesting.' The blonde dobe, for he refused to ever call him anything else, had become a mystery for Sasuke. He remembered the early years at the Academy where said blonde was a complete waste of space. He had no skill, no intelligence, and no prospect to ever improve. Then overnight Naruto changed. Instead of one of the worst students he was an average student. 'Still not good enough to beat me, but a better challenge.'

Ino was alternating between speaking with Kakashi and trying to talk with Sasuke. The latter of whom wasn't paying attention and not even giving out a trademark 'In' in response. Kakashi was willing to engage with her so long as it was about shinobi business and not frivolous pursuits. Not that Kakashi didn't have his own hobbies but he didn't really care for 'girl talk.' From what Sasuke could tell Naruto was content to be left out of the conversation. Not that he could blame him. Sasuke loathed his fans. 'At least now they're less useless.' Sasuke would admit that the jōnin were making his fans better.

Choosing again to block out the world Sasuke got lost in his own fantasy. Naturally it involved an epic battle between him and *that man* and ended with Sasuke standing over *his* lifeless corpse. In his mind it was no contest and *that man* fell within the first few minutes of the fight.

He mindlessly followed his teammates into the office to report another successful mission. Sasuke made himself cognizant of his surroundings in the event something important happened here. "Team InRuSuke reporting another successful mission Hokage-sama." The room had grown accustomed to Kakashi's team naming antics over the last few weeks. It was comical at first but now it just seemed repetitive and boring. And annoying for Sasuke whose name invariably ended up at the end. He should come first in the naming process.

The Hokage accepted Kakashi's 'report' with a simple nod. Seeing that they were about to be saddled with another chore to do for some lazy villager Sasuke couldn't take it anymore. "Enough of these damn chores! Give us a real mission." Though not meaning to yell that is how it happened. The tone of Sasuke's voice was also laced with annoyance and a sense of entitlement.

Ino was quick to agree with the object of her infatuation. "I agree with Sasuke-kun. These 'missions'," she made use of air quotes when she said the word, "as you call them aren't going to help us improve anymore. We need a real mission to get better!" She crossed her arms in an attempt to establish a position that she wouldn't budge from.

Kakashi sighed before thinking to himself, 'Honestly I'm surprised its taken this long for him to snap.' Ever since Sasuke learned that Gai's genin had been on several C-Ranks he was growing increasingly frustrated with their decision to hold off on higher ranked missions to polish off the basics. 'Still it is about time for the first C-Rank.' Kakashi's philosophy was that a C-Rank mission was just dangerous enough to drive home that mastery of the basics is paramount to survival. They were just dangerous enough to make them panic but not so dangerous as to actually put them in danger...so long as the jōnin-sensei did their job right and one could avoid the curse.

Naruto was silent much to, seemingly, everyone's surprise. Kakashi had actually expected the blonde to agree with his comrades. From what he could tell Naruto was also frustrated by the D-Rank missions albeit for entirely different reasons than Ino and Sasuke. Kakashi surmised Naruto was just tired of the atmosphere not so much the actual work. When the people left him alone Naruto seemed to enjoy himself most of the time.

Iruka meanwhile was not pleased with how two of his students were behaving. 'I taught you both better than that!' He took a moment to calm himself before going into lecture mode. "Show some respect to Hokage-sama!" He paused briefly waiting for his students to apologize. When neither one did he was severely disappointed. "Listen you two just became genin. Nobody is going to trust you with higher ranked missions right out the gate."

While Iruka was 'reviewing' how the village ranks and assigns missions, Hiruzen was looking at Kakashi trying to determine where the man fell on the issue. 'Knowing Kakashi he likely agrees that its time but is reluctant to say so on the off chance this encourages more behavior like this from the genin.' He had been quite pleased to hear report of Kakashi not being late to meetings with whatever genin he had for the day and making the most out of his own training. Kakashi wasn't quite ready to assume his position but he was well on the way. 'Hopefully Tsunade will give in soon.' Kakashi was the last resort that he would keep hidden for as long as possible. Once Iruka had finished his lecture the Hokage inserted himself back into the conversation. "Kakashi." He immediately had the man's attention. "Do you think they are ready for a higher ranked mission?" Iruka and the genin, minus Naruto, were shocked that the Hokage would put Kakashi on the spot like that.

Kakashi stood silent as he considered the question. On the one hand he didn't want to encourage his students into believing they could make demands of the Hokage, and on the other he felt they did need the challenge and risk of a C-Rank to grow. "I would have to speak it over with the other jōnin. Technically speaking not all the genin here are my students." Unbeknownst to most of the room the elder council had made their displeasure at breaking from tradition, especially one implemented by the Nidaime Hokage, known to Kakashi, the other jōnin, and the Hokage. Though they managed to deflect any actual complaints it was best not to give them any ammunition.

Sasuke and Ino looked surprised to hear that from Kakashi. All of the jōnin acted like they were all their students, which they were. The politics of the situation escaped them. They weren't overly familiar with the traditional cell structure Konoha typically employed. More so given they had been told this method of training was an experiment of sorts. They had assumed the Hokage had authorized such a method. Evidently there was much they didn't know.

"I see." The Hokage understood Kakashi's concerns. He may believe they're ready but that doesn't necessarily mean everybody else agreed. "Be quick about it Kakashi I can't hold back missions on the off chance you decide to take one." Hiruzen picked up another mission scroll and was looking at which team had been recommended to take it. Unsurprisingly the Hokage entrusted the staffing of missions to others. He couldn't very take time to assign every mission. The only exception were S-Rank missions and the most difficult A-Rank missions. Those he oversaw personally.

Kakashi bowed his head. "Hai." He turned to address the genin. "We're done with missions for today. You have an hour and a half for lunch. Meet me at training ground 7 when you finish. I expect you all to eat smart. Expect a grueling training session." The genin all nodded and left while

Kakashi stayed behind. "Hokage-sama." The man in question returned his gaze to the jōnin. "Has there been any progress on the...other matter pertaining to myself?"

The Hokage shook his head. "I'm afraid not. They're both still being annoyingly stubborn." He allowed himself to get a good look at Kakashi. He received constant updates on the man's progress and training, but it was still nice to make his own assessment. True to his word Kakashi had indeed taken to training himself with vigor again. It made Hiruzen smile at the jōnin in question. "I am pleased to see you keeping to your word though Kakashi. It may yet fall to you."

"Hai, Hokage-sama." Kakashi would do what's required of him even if it was the last thing he wanted to do. "Might I trouble you to ask the other jōnin to meet me at training ground 7 when they return from their missions?" Seeing the Hokage nod in acceptance Kakashi bowed. "Thank you for your time Hokage-sama." He promptly disappeared in a swirl of leaves to wait for his team to arrive and consider if he really should take them out on a C-Rank.

Naruto and Sasuke were certainly ready and Ino was well on her way now that she was taking her training seriously. He wasn't quite sure what changed but was pleased by the development. 'Perhaps she just needed an encouraging shove in a particular direction.' From what Kurenai told him Ino had taken to genjutsu quite well and was really going deeper into psychology to make her even more terrifying. She still had her faults, but the potential was no longer being wasted like it was when she was obsessed only with Sasuke. That obsession was still there but it had lessened, or other priorities were given more merit. 'Either way it's for the best.'

The same could be said of Sakura although not to the same extent. Her inability to work with certain people was starting to interfere with unit cohesion. It was why Ino had been with Kakashi for the past week. Sakura and Naruto just didn't get along, and none of it due to Naruto. Naruto had shown a remarkable ability to work with anybody even if he disliked them. Sakura was the exact opposite, and because Sakura didn't tolerate Naruto she allowed that to carry over to Shino and Shikamaru. 'It's ironic in a way. At first I believed Naruto and Sasuke would be the most problematic and now it's Sakura.'

Sasuke may have been ready in terms of skill, but mentality was another matter entirely. The reason Kakashi wasn't teaching Sasuke any new jutsu was because the boy was obsessed with power and judged that power by the number of techniques known not by the skill with which they were utilized. Kakashi had truly believed Sasuke was like him when he was younger. 'How wrong I was.' Kakashi was certainly withdrawn and isolated but he was not revenge obsessed. 'Perhaps that's why we're different. I could only hate my father who died.' Kakashi thought he could help Sasuke and maybe he still can, but the method eludes him.

"You seem troubled Taicho." So lost in thought was Kakashi he didn't notice Tenzō's arrival until he was behind him. "Or perhaps training genin has merely dulled your skills." The cat masked ANBU was concerned. Rarely did anything consume Kakashi so deeply. Distracted Kakashi may have been but the quick jab to his neck said otherwise about his skill. Clutching at his throbbing throat Tenzō just barely choked out, "Or not."

Kakashi was satisfied that he had reasserted his dominance. It was an odd relationship the two had. 'Then again I have nothing but odd relationships so...' Tenzō and he usually only hung out when Tenzō got back from a particularly dangerous mission. "What brings you here Tenzō?"

Tenzō bristled at his name being thrown around so casually where anybody could hear. "You aren't supposed to call me that Taicho." A statement Kakashi shrugged at making Tenzō sigh. "If you must know I came to escape Tsunade-sama's wrath."

Kakashi eye-rolled at his friend. "What'd you do to make her angry?" The list of possibilities was extensive and often grew with each encounter.

"Nothing. It's Hokage-sama she's furious at." Tenzō may have been calm about it but deep down he was terrified. Furious was not an adequate word to describe what Tsunade had been. "I thought it best to avoid potential crossfire. Thankfully Hokage-sama told us all to leave him for a while and asked not to be disturbed." Tenzō shrugged when Kakashi's eye asked him why he was here. "It doesn't take a full squad of ANBU to guard a door. Besides Tsunade-sama is there as well as Hokage-sama. Angry or not Tsunade-sama isn't about to let anybody but her maim Hokage-sama."

Kakashi sighed and grabbed the bridge of his nose. "I'll ask again. Why are you here?"

Tenzō adopted a serious façade and looked directly at Kakashi's eye. "On my way out, I caught a glimpse of a file Tsunade-sama was holding." Kakashi waved his hand demanding he get to the point. "I don't know what was in it, but the file header read Uzumaki Naruto. I think it safe to say you will have a Sannin sized visit from her soon and given how angry she is at the Hokage you best prepare yourself Taicho." Tenzō didn't want to lose his only real friend. He wasn't supposed to exist and outside his ANBU squad he didn't. Kakashi was the only person who he was close with. "I doubt her anger will subside by the time she is done with Hokage-sama." He disappeared into a nearby tree before Kakashi could respond.

Kakashi could only sigh again at the potential for a visit from an angry Tsunade. She was that much more difficult to deal with when angry. 'I wonder what Hokage-sama did to displease her so much that Tenzō came to warn me.' He'd find out a few hours later but for the moment he was perplexed.

Deciding he had spent enough time thinking Kakashi decided to take the opportunity to squeeze in some more training. He still didn't think he was strong enough to match the likes of Tsunade or Jiraiya, but he was getting there. He created two clones to work on nature manipulation. His reserves still weren't large enough to put the **Kage Bunshin (Shadow Clone)** to the best effect like he suspected Naruto could, but even two would help his training along and encourage his chakra to expand. While his clones worked on nature manipulation Kakashi began the grueling task of ANBU physical training back when he was in charge of training new recruits. 'I'm such a bastard for making so many rooks do this.'

This was the scene Naruto saw when he got back from lunch early. It was surprising to say the least. He couldn't remember the last time he saw Kakashi training so hard. In a way it was mesmerizing. Naruto could easily sense that Kakashi had used a significant amount of chakra to create two clones that would last longer than normal and was still pushing himself so hard physically. For a man like Kakashi it must be exhausting. 'I can't help but wonder why he's doing this.' Really the way things differed from his first time as a genin to this time were befuddling. He anticipated changes to the timeline but nothing like this. 'Perhaps I was naïve to think things would be so cut and dry.'

"You're back early Naruto." The real Kakashi had stopped to catch his breath after all the running and squatting he had just done, "I didn't expect anyone back for at least another half hour."

Naruto shrugged. "I was done with lunch and saw no point in wandering around or trying to squeeze in some more training before whatever you have planned for us." Kakashi nodded in understanding. "Still I'm surprised to see *you* working so hard sensei." He accentuated that word to drive

his point home.

Kakashi responded with an eye-smile. "Well unfortunately for me Hokage-sama has ordered me to be better. It's also why I haven't been late in so long." Kakashi really missed being late. He still visited the memorial stone albeit not every day in fact it had been almost a month since Kakashi's last visit, but now that he wasn't aimlessly staring at it all day he felt incomplete somehow.

"He wants you to be Hokage doesn't he?" The direction his thoughts led only made more sense in context to everything else that was happening. Tsunade and Jiraiya were both in the village and had been forbidden from leaving. All the jōnin had been called to a meeting by the Hokage and not even Shikaku was allowed to miss it. Then after that the jōnin commander had become increasingly more absent from time he used to always spend with the family. The narrowing of Kakashi's eye was also significantly telling. "I'm guessing you're a last resort in the event Jiraiya or Tsunade refuse to take it?" Now Kakashi's eye was narrowing to dangerous levels.

"You're quite well informed for a genin Naruto. I don't think Jiraiya or Tsunade have figured out I'm a potential candidate." Kakashi didn't visibly react when Naruto shrugged but he was definitely suspicious. Naruto seemed to know a lot of things he wasn't meant to. Kakashi believed that the Kyūbi told him of his parents, but there wasn't any reason Naruto should know that Kakashi was a potential candidate to be the Godaime.

Naruto met Kakashi's glare with his eyes. "It's not that surprising or difficult to imagine. You're easily the most well-known jōnin in the village. Kōpi Ninja no Kakashi. Sharingan no Kakashi." Kakashi flinched at the last moniker he was known by. He had yet to reveal his Sharingan to the genin. "The last surviving student of the Yondaime Hokage. The youngest member of the ANBU black ops ever and the second youngest to become a captain. Out of all the other jōnin you are the only real option besides the Sannin. As to how I know all of this. Well for one you're in the bingo book and I may have...borrowed a copy every now and then when I was younger. Your ANBU record...well I was always good at sneaking in places I don't belong."

"So you looked at my file?" His tone easily conveyed his anger. Kakashi didn't like people looking into what he viewed as his personal life.

Naruto nodded. "You were the only surviving student of my father. The only connection I would ever have to the man. Since there were no records of Hatake Kakashi after the Third Great War I assumed you were dead, but then you appeared in an updated version of the bingo book I had, so clearly you were alive." Naruto continued to look directly into Kakashi's eye. "So where and when do shinobi disappear if they aren't dead? The answer is obvious." ANBU. "Naturally I wanted to find out more about you so now that I knew you were ANBU I took advantage of my reputation and snuck a peak at your file when I was replacing the laundry detergent with itching powder."

"THAT WAS YOU!?" Kakashi couldn't help the outburst. That had been a terribly painful week for the entire black ops division. He was only glad he wasn't ANBU anymore or he might have suffered the embarrassment he loved to hold over their heads. "Of course it was you...who else would do something like that." Naruto could only smirk at Kakashi. "I still don't appreciate you digging into my life Naruto."

Naruto shrugged again. "And I don't appreciate being the most hated being in the leaf for something beyond my control. I don't appreciate that I have a storage closet devoted to storing my medical records. Life sucks Kakashi and we don't always get what we want."

"You can say that again." Kakashi mumbled under his breath. Evidently Naruto heard him because he nodded once more. "If you knew all this about me why did you never try to find me?" Kakashi's eye was sad. It was a rarity for the man to show any side of himself that wasn't a stoic killer. The fact that Kakashi was the only link Naruto had to his father cut both ways. Naruto was the only link left for Kakashi too.

Naruto allowed his gaze to soften as he looked at the man. Kakashi may not have been the perfect teacher or really been there for Naruto for much of his life, but the man was still important to him. He was finding it hard to maintain a distant and neutral relationship to the people that mattered in his life despite their faults. "Your record didn't paint a pretty picture. After my father died it was mission after mission after mission for you. Each one with a high probability of death. Clearly you wanted to die." If Naruto had to describe the look on Kakashi's face after hearing his assessment he could only describe it as regretful. "I imagine like with everybody else it was too painful and difficult to look at me and not see my father, so I stayed away like I assumed you wanted."

Kakashi wanted to say that he was wrong, but he knew that Naruto wasn't. He was lost after the Yondaime's death. "And now?"

Naruto averted his gaze. "And now it's on you to decide what will happen." Kakashi was about to respond when Naruto sensed Sasuke nearing their location. "Say what you want to quickly because Broody McDuck is almost here."

Kakashi let out a small laugh. "I don't know what exactly I want, other than to be involved in your life some way."

Naruto nodded. "We'll table this discussion for another time then." To which Kakashi agreed with his own nod.

True to his word Sasuke came skulking into the training grounds with his hands buried in his pockets and his eyes narrowed in perpetual annoyance. Ino wasn't far behind though Naruto chalked this up to coincidence and not stalking. Kakashi waited patiently for his students to meander their way to him. They were still technically early so he wouldn't admonish them for their lackadaisical pace. 'Maybe.' Even if they weren't late it didn't mean they should be insouciant about their punctuality.

"Ahh there's the rest of my cute little genin." Kakashi gloated internally when he heard Sasuke 'tsk' at being called cute. The three genin formed a semi-circle around him. "Today's training will be exciting!" Kakashi pulled out a stack of paper and handed one to each of the genin. "Today we'll be finding out what your affinities are. To do so all you have to do is channel a bit of chakra to the paper you hold in your hand, like this." Kakashi pulled out another slip and held it between his fingers before the paper crumpled. "The way the paper reacts will tell you what your affinity is."

Ino looked at the paper and Kakashi skeptically. "Sensei?" Kakashi allowed his visible eye to rest on the blonde girl. "Why exactly are we doing this?" She knew the basic principles of elemental ninjutsu but that was usually something only aspiring jōnin focused on.

Kakashi eye-smiled. "Well I'm not about to waste my time attempting elemental manipulation with you three right now." Sasuke scoffed at not receiving some form of training which Kakashi ignored. "At the same time, I'm not about to let you take a C-Rank mission without at least one elemental technique under your belt. Learning what your affinity is will make it easy for me to find a jutsu for you to learn." Shinobi may be capable of using all five basic elements on their own it was very rare to encounter somebody who could use more than three outside a bloodline. It was part of why Sarutobi Hiruzen was originally known as the Shinobi no Kami. His mastery of all five elements was impressive. More so given he accomplished the feat at an exceptionally young age.

"Now don't be shy my cute little students. If the paper crumples, like mine did, then you have a lightning affinity. If it burns obviously that's fire." He

expected Sasuke and Ino to have a fire affinity. Sasuke because he was an Uchiha and their affinity for fire is well known. Ino because this is Hi no Kuni and fire was one of the most common affinities here. "Water and the paper will get wet. Earth the paper crumbles away. Lastly if you have a wind affinity the paper gets cut in half." Kakashi would have guessed that Naruto would have a wind or water affinity because of his parents but the development of Yōton (Lava) almost precluded that possibility. "The more pronounced the paper's reaction the stronger your affinity with that element."

"Is it possible for a person to have more than one affinity?" Sasuke was intently staring at the piece of paper that would help set him on his path to killing *that man*. So, he missed Kakashi looking directly at him glad that he asked the question.

"It's possible. Its also incredibly rare for anybody without a bloodline to possess more than one. For example, you Sasuke." Now he had the boy's attention. "I suspect you will have a fire affinity, as I'm sure you do as well. Your clan was well known for their Fire jutsu after all." Sasuke smirked at the comment. "Should you have more than one affinity it will be truly surprising. As I said outside of bloodlines multiple affinities are a rarity and given that the Uchiha bloodline is a dōjutsu it would be even more impressive. I suppose I should expound and say that unless it's a Kekai Genkai like Yōton (Lava) or Bakuton (Explosion) which require the combination of two different elements than the odds of you having a second affinity drop significantly." Kakashi was pleased to see that he had Sasuke's undivided attention now. "Now my cute little genin channel chakra into the paper."

Sasuke went first and channeled chakra into the paper as he glared intently at it. To his and Kakashi's surprise Sasuke's paper first crumpled and then burned away. Sasuke was at first disheartened to see that he did not possess a strong fire affinity like most of his clan, but his sorrow turned to overwhelming joy at seeing he had two natural affinities. "How very interesting. Never would have pegged you as having a lightning affinity Sasuke, but I see a fire affinity as well. Very impressive."

Sasuke's back got a little straighter and he held his head a bit higher while letting out his usual response. "Hn." No doubt in this case meaning, 'Well of course. I'm an Uchiha its to be expected that I have multiple affinities.' He closed his eyes and smirked in superiority.

Kakashi nodded. Whether he understood what Sasuke's grunt meant was unknown. "In any event this is quite fortunate for you Sasuke." Said boy cracked his eyes open a tad to look in the jōnin's direction. "I am one of the best lightning users in the village." Sasuke's eyes opened fully now as he openly considered the possibilities and implications of what Kakashi just said. "In any event, Ino why don't you go next."

Ino had been staring at Sasuke since it was discovered that he had two affinities. 'Wow. Sasuke's even cooler than I thought! To think he'd already have two affinities as a genin.' She almost missed Kakashi calling for her to find out about her own affinity. 'I bet I'll have two affinities as well then Sasuke will see I'm much better wife material than Billboard-brow!' She placed the paper on the palm of her hand and covered it with the other as she focused her chakra in that direction. Feeling the paper give way to something else she removed the hand on top to see a crumbled bit of dirt on her hands.

"Earth. A very strong element. Somewhat rare in this country but not unheard of for a Yamanaka." Ino looked at him quizzically. "Earth is usually viewed as something very rigid. Unchanging. Unmoving. In other words, earth is a strong base for you as a person. Meaning you're less likely to lose yourself when you go strolling through other people's minds."

Ino was surprised and suspicious of Kakashi. "You seem to know a lot about my clan's techniques sensei." The tone she used left no mystery as to her feelings.

"Maa. I've worked with several Yamanaka over the years. If you're observant enough you can pick up things." Kakashi was waving his hand dismissively at her conveying that there's no need to worry or be concerned. "Earth is one of the more defensive elements and will be very useful for you Ino if you continue to focus on the other areas I've recommended. I'm not very proficient with earth jutsu but I can still teach you a few things." Ino nodded before focusing on what Kakashi had told her about her element. 'I'm glad they're actually *thinking* about what I'm telling them.' He turned his attention to Naruto. "And finally, you."

Naruto nodded and held the paper in his hand. Kakashi wasn't overly surprised to see the paper split. Namikaze Minato had had a very powerful wind affinity. Nor was he surprised to see that it had split into four pieces and that two of those pieces were burning and crumbling. However, the addition of a soggy piece of paper threw him for a loop. 'Four...Four natural affinities. Two from a Kekai Genkai. Two from...I would assume his parents. Just what kind of monster are you Naruto?' Kakashi stared dumbfounded at the result as did Ino and Sasuke albeit for entirely different reasons. "Well...that's quite the surprise Naruto. Even amongst the unheard of what just happened is unheard of. I don't think I know anybody who has four natural affinities." Not even the wielder of a Kekai Tōta had four natural affinities. 'I have to be sure.' Kakashi handed Naruto another slip of paper. "Do it again Naruto."

Naruto shrugged and channeled chakra into the paper again getting the same reaction. He knew only two of his affinities were natural. Wind and water. Father and mother. His earth and fire affinities had both come from the many bijū he had encountered in his previous life. As had his ability to use lava. Wood was a development after his encounter with Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo and the revelation that he was Asura reborn once more. If he hadn't been fortunate enough to observe and briefly be taught by Senju Hashirama he may never have been able to make use of it at all.

Ino was flabbergasted at Naruto. Kakashi had said that what Sasuke did was rare and impressive already, and Naruto just *doubled* the number of reactions Sasuke had. 'What in the world is going on?!' Had this been a few years ago Ino might have foolishly accused Naruto of cheating somehow. Now however, she knew such a thing to be impossible. Especially since it had happened twice right before her eyes. 'Wait till people hear about this!' Ino was already plotting ways to quickly spread the fact that Naruto has *four* natural elemental affinities. 'It'll be a juicy bit of gossip amongst the shinobi for a long time. This will epic!'

Sasuke was internally seething at being shown up once again by the dobe. 'How the hell can he have four affinities when I only have two?!' Once again Naruto got everything while Sasuke got nothing. Sasuke grit his teeth in frustration and unconsciously let out a grunt, "Tsk."

Kakashi could see the jealousy and rage in Sasuke's eyes and the casual indifference Naruto was displaying toward Sasuke. As if he wasn't concerned at all about Sasuke. If Kakashi was able to read Naruto's mind than he would realize that he wasn't. Naruto knew better than Kakashi what kind of person Sasuke was. This was merely reinforcement of already established behavior and personality. But Kakashi couldn't read Naruto's mind so he just assumed Naruto didn't care. Which was also true. "Well then now that that's done, let's see about getting you three started on some new jutsu hmm?" That seemed to soothe some of Sasuke's ire.

Thankfully Kakashi was prepared for the day he'd start teaching jutsu. He had a plethora of scrolls on jutsu of each element. The benefits of being the man whose copied over 1000 techniques. "Now all of you don't know how lucky you are to have me as a sensei." Kakashi caught Ino rolling her eyes at his statement. 'See you just don't know how lucky you are but you will soon.' He took out three larger than average scrolls. Unrolled them and took out one scroll from each of them. It was done quickly and without Sasuke or Ino getting a good look at them, but Naruto did. On each

scroll was a different kanji. One had the kanji for lightning, one had the kanji for water, and one had the kanji for earth. But just as quickly as Kakashi had pulled the three larger scrolls out they were gone.

Kakashi was now holding three scrolls in between his fingers. "You see I am one of the few people alive that can make use of all five elements." Ino and Sasuke's eyes widened, but Naruto's did not. 'Interesting. Either he already knew, or he just doesn't find it impressive given I have the Sharingan.' Kakashi shrugged internally not being overly concerned at Naruto's lack of surprise. "Now you understand why I'm the ninjutsu teacher of the group." Ino was the only one who nodded. "In each of these scrolls is a jutsu." He tossed one to each of the genin. "Inside is a low rank jutsu that I think will complement your style. I know some of you," Kakashi looked directly at Sasuke, "think I've only been wasting your time for the past month." Sasuke only looked more irritating at being called out. "But you're wrong. I was taking the time to observe each of you and learn the way you fight. Open the scrolls."

Sasuke unfurled his scroll and read the title aloud. "**Raiton: Jibashi (Lightning Style: Electromagnetic Murder)**." Sasuke was thoroughly engrossed in reading about the jutsu he had been given. 'An offensive close-range attack with varying degrees of strength depending on the amount of chakra the user expels from their hands. If a user has enough chakra and is skilled enough in the technique they would be able to cut through rock at the jutsu's most powerful moment.' Sasuke could only agree that this jutsu would be useful for him. Not only did it encourage close-range fighting which Sasuke currently excelled in, but *that man* wouldn't expect him to have a lightning affinity and he'd be able to momentarily catch said person off guard. Sasuke smirked at the thought and moved away to start practicing on his own.

Ino wasn't as excited as Sasuke about learning new jutsu but she wanted too wanted to go on a higher ranked mission. Opening her scroll with some gusto like Sasuke she read the title aloud. "**Doton: Moguragakure no Jutsu (Earth Style: Hidden Mole Jutsu)**?" Unlike Sasuke who immediately recognized how his jutsu could be incorporated into his style Ino wasn't as sure. Since Kakashi had encouraged her to focus on medical training and genjutsu she figured he'd give her something to protect whoever was injured. Accordingly, she gave Kakashi a questioning look.

"This jutsu will be the first step toward another jutsu that will be exceptionally helpful in immobilizing your opponent Ino. I picked this path specifically with your clan techniques in mind." Kakashi saw that Ino was beginning to piece it all together now. "I know the biggest danger facing you and your clan when you use those techniques is missing, so I've given you a way to reduce that. It also gives your clan techniques more viability and reduces your dependence on the Nara or Akimichi to hold and restrain your target long enough for your jutsu to take effect. However," he altered his tone to be as serious as possible because he wanted her to focus intently on what he was about to say, "before I can teach you how to immobilize your opponent this way I must teach you how to make yourself disappear. This jutsu while not the end goal of what I have in mind will still make you more dangerous." Ino nodded before running off by herself to get started.

"Guess I'm the last one again huh sensei?" Naruto's tone sounded surprisingly playful and teasing. "If I didn't know better Kakashi-sensei I'd think you wanted me all to yourself. Though I think I'm a little too young for you, sensei." Kakashi shifted slightly uncomfortable at the insinuation. "Is that the kind of stuff that's in that book you're always reading sensei? Do you like stories about a sensei and their student?" Naruto smirked at Kakashi. 'Teasing him will be so much fun!' Last time Kakashi was the one always teasing him, but not this time. "Perhaps when I'm a little older if you're still hung up on me we can see what else you can teach me *sensei*."

Kakashi was so confused and lost right now. Earlier Naruto had said it was up to him to decide what role he had in his life, if any, and now here is said blonde teasing him. 'Worse still its working damn it!' Jiraiya's book did indeed include a scene about a sensei and his student but Kakashi wasn't that big of a pervert. He'd never get involved with a student. 'And I definitely wouldn't get involved with a child!' "Maa, maa. Who knew you could be such a tease Naruto. But I do believe Shikamaru would take issue with me trying to do anything to *his* Naru-chan don't you?" Naruto's smirk dropped and Kakashi adopted one of his own. "Always remember that two can play this game Naruto. Now enough playtime open your scroll already."

Naruto nodded and unraveled his scroll to see what he had been given. "**Suiton: Mizuame Nabara (Water Style: Syrup Trap)**." Naruto had never encountered this jutsu. "Never heard of it."

Kakashi nodded. "I'm not surprised. You'd be the first person to ever learn this jutsu, not counting the creator obviously." Technically the creator of the jutsu didn't 'learn' the technique since it didn't exist. "I had to go through a lot of trouble to get my hands on this jutsu for you Naruto." The blonde looked at Kakashi and tilted his head to the side silently asking 'really?'. "Yes really. This jutsu was created by Kamizuki Izumo and he's very proud of it."

Naruto was shocked. "You mean one of the eternal gate guardians made this?!" It truly was a surprising development. Most didn't view Izumo or Kotetsu as real chūnin since they were only ever assigned to gate duty or as errand boys for the Hokage. Naruto himself couldn't help but wonder why they were never assigned other missions. 'But they had been assigned to Asuma's team for the Nijū Shōtai (Twenty Platoons) to hunt the Akatsuki by Baa-chan.' Still to think one of them had developed a jutsu was surprising.

'That's probably the first *real* response I've seen from him.' Kakashi smirked at Naruto's genuine reaction. "Yes, Naruto one of them developed this jutsu. And don't even think of mocking them about constantly being assigned gate duty. Believe it or not it *is* a very important post in the village. They are typically the first ones to encounter travelers. It's on them to identify potential threats trying to enter the village." Kakashi had to admit that Izumo was the only one of the duo to take that point seriously and be proud of it. Not that Kotetsu wasn't proud either he just wasn't as vocal about it. "Now I expect you to get that jutsu down to the point Izumo is crying because you're better at it than him." 'After all it cost me my autographed first edition of Icha Icha Paradise! I couldn't believe Izumo was a fan of Jiraiya-sama's works!'

"Hai sensei." Naruto started reading the scroll with a newfound respect for Izumo. It wasn't often a chūnin was found creating their own jutsu. Jōnin sure, but chūnin? That was rare. The more Naruto read about the technique the more impressed he was by it and its creator. 'To think Izumo of all people would be responsible for such a creative and awesome jutsu. I wish I had had this for some of my pranks back in the day!' Being able to create a sticky substance that can be moved with an additional application of chakra would have been great fun.

Naruto was unconsciously grinning like a fox which was beginning to scare Kakashi. Kakashi decided it'd be best if he left the boy alone and help Sasuke or Ino with their jutsu first. "I wish you luck Naruto. I'll come back over here after spending some time with my other cute little students." Naruto gave no indication that he had heard Kakashi causing the man to shrug and walk over to Ino. "So Ino tell me what you think."

The blonde girl looked up from the scroll. "It seems rather uncomplicated. The only way it'll work is if I can disappear without being noticed. As soon as they see me disappear underground they'll get off the ground." Kakashi nodded along with everything she was saying. The need to not be seen was the biggest pitfall of the jutsu. Ino though already had ideas to overcome this. "I think I see why you chose this jutsu for me sensei." Kakashi turned his head and let out a 'Hmm?' "Since we work in teams of four or more then my allies can distract the target and make it easier for me to slip away unseen. Additionally, since you're having me take up genjutsu I can use a genjutsu to either give the illusion I'm still near or that I was never

there to begin with."

Kakashi smiled down at her. "I'm glad to see you thinking of how you can use this. However, this is just the first jutsu I will be teaching you. As we move forward I will teach more that will help you use this ability should you find yourself alone or your squad incapacitated for whatever reason. For example," Kakashi stood up threw down a smoke bomb and created a **Doton: Kage Bunshin (Earth Style: Shadow Clone)** made of mud and sank beneath the ground where he created his clone. He then moved to be behind Ino and popped up right behind her. The clone Kakashi resumed where the original left off, "if you use smoke bombs to obscure your position and leave behind a clone of yourself you can potentially get the drop on your opponent." Ino jumped when she felt Kakashi tap her shoulder. "Just like that." He eye-smiled at the girl who looked thoughtful after recovering from the brief fright.

"This jutsu is useful for things other than catching somebody off guard then as well." Kakashi nodded and was internally happy that Ino was thinking creatively. "This will be a lot of fun to learn, thanks sensei!"

Kakashi waved his hand at her dismissively. "Maa. Don't thank me it's my job. If you keep thinking of how to creatively use your jutsu you'll really impress me. A jutsu's power is dependent on more than just the nature of the technique. Now focus on me I want you watch how I perform the jutsu and tell me what you see." Kakashi waited until the girl's eyes were focused solely on him. "**Doton: Moguragakure no Jutsu (Earth Style: Hidden Mole Technique)**." Kakashi slowly channeled his chakra beneath his feet to give Ino the opportunity to study what's happening around him. Ino watched intently as Kakashi slowly sank into the ground until there was nothing left. He then slowly reappeared in the same spot. "Now tell me what happened."

"Well obviously you sank into the Earth and reappeared using chakra, but I know there's more to it than just that." Kakashi nodded and patiently waited for Ino to dissect what she thought happened. "If I had to guess I'd say you channeled chakra to the areas you were in contact with the ground...as to what you did with your chakra I can't really say. To me it looked like you were just sliding down, like water down a hill."

Kakashi nodded in understanding. "You're right about where I channeled my chakra as to how I slid down into the ground the answer's simple. Using my chakra, I grind it against the earth softening it, but not too much that it becomes sand or dirt. If you go that far than its noticeable and a lot harder to cover the hole you've made, and the greater the likelihood you'll be detected. This is also the way you move underground. If you can successfully learn how to do this jutsu there are several more techniques that you'll have no problem learning. Well I've told you what I do now its up to you to figure out how to execute it yourself. Good luck. Ja ne!"

Kakashi left the blonde girl and made his way over toward Sasuke who appeared to already be trying to emit lightning from his fingertips. 'Somebody is overly eager.' He stood and watched Sasuke try and fail for a few minutes. "How's it going Sasuke?"

"Hn." Sasuke let out a grunt.

To which Kakashi nodded. "Why thank you I am the best sensei in the world. I agree wholeheartedly, but I was really asking how the jutsu was going."

Sasuke let out another grunt only this time he was frustrated. "Hn."

"Oh well thank you Sasuke. I'm flattered honestly. However, I couldn't possibly return your feelings you see for a couple of reasons. You're much to young for me and I don't really go for the whole brooding arrogant type." Kakashi eye-smiled at the black-haired boy whose eyebrow was starting to twitch. "I'm glad you could trust me with such a personal secret though Sasuke. I promise I won't tell a soul that you're gay."

Kakashi said it just loud enough for Ino to hear. She promptly shrieked out, "WHAT?!" Before running over to Sasuke and shaking the boy violently. "You're gay Sasuke? No! It can't possibly be true!" She had lifted Sasuke off the ground slightly and unceremoniously dropped him as she turned to glare at Kakashi. "What'd you do to Sasuke you disgusting old pervert?!" Ino was demanding answers.

Kakashi again waved his hand dismissively as he smiled at her. "Maa, maa. I didn't do anything Ino-chan. Sasuke-kun here just confessed his deepest feelings for me. Obviously I told him it could never be but that I was flattered he felt that way about me." Kakashi overdramatically turned his head to the sky. "Oh woe is me...to be cursed with such devilishly handsome looks that even my poor students succumb to my charm and appeal!"

"I AM NOT GAY!" Sasuke shouted out while his eyes burned with a rage that promised Kakashi pain.

Kakashi looked back down at them. "You aren't?" He saw Sasuke shake his head no as assertively as possible. "Hmm. I could've sworn you just confessed to me."

Sasuke grit his teeth and "tsk'd" at Kakashi. "I did no such thing." Still wishing death upon his sensei.

Kakashi met Sasuke's glare with a look that screamed he wasn't scared one bit by the angry genin. Kakashi was in fact amused by Sasuke's anger. "Well then I guess next time you'll be a big boy and use your words instead of grunting when I'm speaking to you." He ruffled Sasuke's hair. "Won't you Sasu-chan." Sasuke grunted again so Kakashi grabbed his ear like a mother would a small child. "What was that Sasuke?"

"I said yes now release me!" Kakashi complied and Sasuke started rubbing his ear trying to soothe the pain away. 'I'm going to kill him one day!'

"That's what I thought you said." Kakashi crossed his arms and continued to look in Sasuke's direction. "Now how are you finding the jutsu?" Ino was still standing nearby gaping at the entire situation. "Ino don't you have a jutsu to start learning?" Said girl snapped out of her distraction and went back over to where she was. He turned his attention back to Sasuke. "Jutsu, talk, now."

Sasuke was still rubbing his ear. "I'm having difficulty figuring out how to convert my chakra into lightning." He looked away from Kakashi not liking having to admit he was struggling. "I've only ever done fire."

Kakashi though wasn't trying to belittle Sasuke. "It's understandable. Tell me what you think the differences between fire and lightning are."

Sasuke was silent for a few moments before trying to formulate a response. "Well fire burns most everything in its path. It destroys but creates just as much as it destroys. A burned forest will regrow from the ashes of the old one. Lightning is similarly destructive but its more directed. More precise as opposed to fire's wide reach. A lightning strike might destroy a single tree while fire would burn the entire forest."

"Good. You touched on enough of what I was going for. You're right...for the most part. Lightning is very direct and precise but also one the most

difficult elements to manipulate. You don't need chakra to be able to influence fire, but you're hard pressed to exert any natural control over lightning. Watch closely. **Raiton: Jibashi (Lightning Style: Electromagnetic Murder).**" Lightning began sparking from Kakashi's fingertips. As Kakashi moved each finger slightly the lightning arced in a similar manner, and as he brought his hands closer together the lightning began to arc more chaotically. More dangerously. "What do you see Sasuke?"

"You're pushing chakra out from your fingertips and using them as a conduit to direct the flow of the lightning. What I don't know is how to convert my chakra into lightning." Sasuke was so focused on the lightning flow that he didn't notice everything else going on around him. 'It'd be so much easier if I had my Sharingan and I could see what the chakra was doing.'

"That's to be expected. I am working backwards here by having you all learn elemental techniques without first learning elemental manipulation. It may seem counter-intuitive but if you can learn how to execute a jutsu then when it comes time to learn manipulation you'll have an easier time of it." Kakashi paused to take in a breath. 'Not to mention manipulation of your element is on a whole other level than elemental ninjutsu.'

"Lightning is like water in that it flows from one point to another, usually in a closed circuit. This jutsu disrupts that circuit and results in the discharge you're seeing which can then be guided by the user. Now as to how you get there well I'm afraid you're going to have to try it on your own until you get it. I could give you all the answers but then I wouldn't be teaching you anything." Kakashi watched as Sasuke unconsciously pouted like a child that just had his favorite toy taken away.

Kakashi was about to head back over to Naruto when he felt a shiver run down his spine. "Kakashi! My youthful rival!" The shouted greeting made Kakashi pale slightly. "I see you're hard at work training your genin to make their flames of youth burn even brighter than they already do!" Gai was somehow even louder than before.

Kakashi sighed dramatically at his friend's behavior. "Hmm. Did you say something Gai?"

Gai faltered mid-step as his eyes became sullen and rain cloud formed above his head. "Damn you Kakashi and your hip cool attitude!"

The sight made Kakashi chuckle, internally. "Ohayo Gai!" Kakashi waved lazily at the green spandex clad jōnin. "Fun mission?"

Kakashi watched the genin behind Gai shiver at the mention of the mission. "Why yes indeed! My youthful students just returned from capturing that lovable feline Tora!"

Kakashi did chuckle out loud now. "I see. Well then Gai I'll let you get to training your students. As much as I think some sparring would be beneficial for the three I have today I'm afraid I've just started them out on some ninjutsu and I want them to focus on it for the rest of the day."

Gai nodded and turned around to face his students. "Come! Let us train until our youthful flames burn brightly all around us! And if they don't I'll climb to the top of the Hokage Monument using nothing but my big toes!"

Lee's eyes burst into flames as he passionately agreed with Gai. "Gai-sensei!"

"LEE!"

"GAI-SENSEI!"

"LEE!"

Kakashi turned his back before he was forced to endure the Sunset of Youth...but he still heard the waves crashing in the background much to his regret. 'Sometimes you really are too much Gai.'

Gai was still vanishing into the distance when Kakashi heard a disembodied voice behind him. "Is it safe?" Kakashi nodded and Asuma walked in with Shikamaru, Hinata, and Sakura trailing behind him. "Thank god." Asuma saw the other three genin with scrolls around them as they were all trying to figure something out. "Starting them on ninjutsu then are you?" Another nod from Kakashi. "Well then I'll give you these three as well."

Kakashi took out the stack of chakra paper again. "Take one each of you." Hinata and Sakura each walked up and picked up a piece of paper, but Shikamaru did not. "Something wrong Shikamaru?"

The pineapple-haired shinobi shrugged. "There's no need to waste the paper. Fire and earth."

Kakashi nodded but wanted him to take one anyway. "Humor me then." Shikamaru sighed and took a piece before channeling chakra into it. Kakashi watched as the paper tried to burn and turn to dust at the same time. "Interesting. Well I'll deal with you in a moment Shikamaru." He turned to focus on Sakura and Hinata. "Now then this paper will tell me what your chakra affinity is and then I'll be providing each of you with a jutsu scroll I expect you to learn within a week." The two girls nodded. "Just channel your chakra into the paper." Both girls did so and Kakashi saw two more pieces of paper get soggy. "Well I honestly didn't expect water from a Hyūga. Earth, maybe even lightning, but not water. Water will suit you well Sakura." Kakashi once more unsealed two scrolls from the larger water scroll and tossed one at each girl.

Hinata caught the scroll a bit apprehensively. It was generally frowned upon for a Hyūga to learn something that was from outside the clan. "**Suiton: Suiben (Water Style: Water Whip)?**"

Sakura did the same. "**Suiton: Suijinheki (Water Style: Water Wall).**"

"Since your clan's fighting style is focused on getting in close I decided you might need something with a bit more range. You can use this jutsu to attack or pull your enemies closer." Kakashi had spent a great deal of time watching all of them fight and knew what would compliment them and what wouldn't. He picked out several jutsu for each genin given he didn't have any idea what their affinities might be. "As the primary support specialist Sakura you need to keep yourself and your allies safe. Walls are great at delaying attacks and obscuring movement allowing you time to move out of the way." The girl slightly deflated at hearing she'd only ever be on the defensive. "Calm down. This is the first of many I'll be teaching you moving forward." Sakura nodded and walked away from her scroll to start reading.

"That just leaves you Shikamaru." Kakashi was pointing at him. "Earth or fire?" Shikamaru would be the only genin who got to choose which element Kakashi gave him. Out of all the genin Shikamaru was the one person Kakashi figured he'd have the hardest time helping. Shikamaru would just know himself better than Kakashi ever could.

Shikamaru turned thoughtful for a minute. On the one hand he liked earth techniques because they helped him create more shadows and trap his enemies, and on the other he lacked offensive capability that fire could really help him with. "Fire. Something with a variable range preferably."

Kakashi tossed him a scroll but before it could get there Asuma intercepted it. "If you don't mind Kakashi I've got a jutsu I think would be good for Shikamaru." Kakashi shrugged and gestured with his hands for Asuma to have at it. Asuma tossed the scroll back to Kakashi before pulling out one of his own and handing it to Shikamaru. "This will compliment you if you pick up more earth jutsu as well."

Shikamaru took the scroll. "**Katon: Karyūdan (Fire Style: Fire Dragon Bomb)**." He was vaguely familiar with the jutsu as he had read the report of the Sandaime Hokage's last battle with Orochimaru. It wasn't really what he wanted but it'd do. "This'll work." He walked over near to where Naruto was working leaving the jōnin alone briefly.

"Sasuke wants," Kakashi chuckled, "I mean *demanded* a C-Rank mission."

Asuma snorted. "Well we figured it was only a matter of time. I'm sure the Hokage relished the moment." Kakashi nodded. "You're thinking its time?" Another nod. "That's why you're giving them each a jutsu corresponding to their affinity?" Yet another nod. "You sure they're ready." This time Kakashi shrugged in a non-committal manner. "I'm not sure they're ready, but at the same time it might be the push a few of them need."

"That's precisely what I was thinking." Kakashi said. Gai, while he had included his team in joint training exercises, was continuing to train them on their own for the time being and took their own missions. Ino, Sakura, Chōji, Hinata, and Kiba were the ones Kakashi was specifically worried about. Ino and Sakura still weren't taking things as seriously as they needed to. 'Though I've seen a radically different Ino today than I have in the past month.' Chōji and Hinata were still reluctant to injure people and unconsciously held back in sparring matches. And Kiba...Kiba was loud and brash exactly what you'd expect of an Inuzuka. Brutally effective in Taijutsu but overly reliant on his partner and lacking alternatives.

"I think we can agree there's a handful of genin that *are* ready for a C-Rank...at least physically and in terms of ability." Asuma nodded at Kakashi's statement. "Even if the rest aren't there's no reason for us to hold some of them back. However, we are collectively training them so at the very least we should agree on whose ready. Then if we decide not all of them are ready for a C-Rank we can change the team leader based on the mission parameters."

"I don't think Ino and Sakura are physically prepared for a C-Rank, and I really don't think Sakura is mentally prepared for a mission." C-Rank missions were usually simple escort or delivery missions. Mostly to avoid interception by bandits, highwaymen, and wild animals on the journey to and from Point A and Point B. However, the likelihood of combat increases drastically. Even the most talented of shinobi usually freezes up in their first combat situation. Asuma sighed. "Despite my reservations about them I believe they need a C-Rank to really get into the proper mindset. Something simple and straightforward like the delivery run to Cha no Kuni (Land of Tea). It's pretty safe and if there is combat it won't be the same as bandit eradication."

Kakashi's thoughts mirrored Asuma's. "I wholeheartedly agree. In any event we sho-..." He would have continued had he not noticed a person angrily stomping into the training ground. "Tsunade-sama. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I'm here for your blonde brat, brat." Tsunade was trying and failing to control her rage. She had spent the better part of the last month going through every record she could get her hands on of one Uzumaki Naruto. What she found had disgusted her beyond belief. It took a month, 'A fucking *month*!', to go through all his records. A week and a half alone to read the medical records. After she finished that she promptly fired a tenth of the hospital staff. She would have fired more if it wouldn't reduce the already short-staffed hospital to dangerous levels. Tsunade had developed a respect for the blonde brat for maintaining his sanity through everything.

"Hmm. I take it you mean Naruto then?" Kakashi just wanted to be sure she wasn't here for Ino for some reason. Tsunade nodded slightly. "Thank Kami Tenzō warned me." "Naruto!" The blonde looked over to him and before he could even wave him over he got up and jogged toward Tsunade.

Naruto could feel eyes on him as he moved toward Kakashi, but he was more focused on Tsunade. Once he was close enough that only those nearby would hear he allowed himself to greet one of his most precious people. "Baa-chan!"

Tsunade wanted to be angry at being called old, and despite how angry she was right now, she didn't have the heart to chastise him. Instead she sighed. "How're you doing brat?"

Naruto smiled brightly at her. "I'm fine. What's up?"

"I'll be your physician from now on. I don't care what its for. You fall and scrape your knee you see me. You get a paper cut you see me. You lose an arm you see me. Got it?" Tsunade was trying her best to sound kind and gentle. Thankfully she had worked out a great deal of frustration earlier on the Hokage. 'And I'll be paying Jiraiya a visit after this!' The thought momentarily made her smirk at what she had planned for him.

Naruto nodded. "Well I'll really only have to see you for the arm part, or something else major like that. Fuzzy usually takes care of the rest." Naruto noticed them all tense at the mention of his tenant. "Something about him dying if I die. Not that he'd really die but apparently the process of reforming is not pleasant. Who knew am I right?" They were all gaping at him now. "What? I had a lonely childhood with nobody to talk to except a giant fox sealed in my gut. Not like it can get out...honestly to think you guys have so little faith in the Yondaime."

"Your tenant aside. You only see me or Shizune from now on alright?" Tsunade voice was stern and wouldn't accept argument from Naruto. She was satisfied as soon as Naruto nodded. "Good. I'm working on cleaning house but there's not much to work with here at the moment." It would be years before the hospital would return to levels she left it at.

Naruto saw an opportunity. "Well if you're looking for more medics I think there's two people here who would be excellent candidates." Tsunade, Kakashi, and Asuma were surprised at what Naruto had just said. All for different reasons.

Tsunade was curious as to what the blonde had to say. Ever since she'd read the reports she wanted to know more about the boy. "Really? Tell me."

"Well..." Naruto pointed at Sakura first. "Sakura has the best chakra control out of all of us except maybe Hinata. She's very intelligent and I suspect she has an eidetic memory. I also think she's unconsciously been channeling chakra into her strikes at times. I used to let her hit me and it hurt...like a lot. Way more than somebody with her amount of strength should be able to hit with." Naruto knew that would interest Tsunade. Not even Shizune had managed to replicate her strength despite having spent over a decade studying under her.

"The other one would be Hinata." This time he pointed at the bluenette that was obviously a Hyūga. "Like Sakura she has damn near perfect

chakra control. She also has the Byakugan which I imagine would be an invaluable tool for an iryō-nin." Naruto knew she had Tsunade as soon as he mentioned the Byakugan. He knew Tsunade had always wanted a Hyūga to be trained as a medic, but they had always refused. "She has some confidence issues but working with a shinobi like you would certainly help her in that regard."

Tsunade was skeptical of the two after hearing Naruto's description. It takes more than simple chakra control to be a good medic. "I'll consider it if they can prove to me they're interested." She was planning on selecting a few shinobi to train herself with Shizune's help before letting Shizune run the program on her own. "I have to go visit a toad before getting back to the hospital so remember what I said brat." She turned to start walking away before turning back one last time. "Brat." Naruto was still standing there. "I'll take you up on your offer just remember you're paying."

Naruto couldn't stop the joy from spreading across all his features. "Really?!" His smile widened when Tsunade nodded. "Awesome! I can't wait Baa-chan." He was about to run off before he stopped himself. "Ne can I bring a friend of my own?" Tsunade shrugged not seeing a reason why he couldn't. "Sweet!" Naruto immediately turned and ran off towards Shikamaru. "We'll set it up later Baa-chan! See you later!" Naruto knew people were staring and even more curious now, but he didn't care. All that mattered was that he had the chance to get close to Tsunade again.

Tsunade watched as Naruto ran off toward another boy she assumed was a Nara given his appearance. She let out a small smile as she watched Naruto talk and gesture animatedly in her direction. She wasn't certain what Naruto was saying but guessed that the Nara would be the one to join them whenever they had that dinner. 'Guess I'll really have to bring Shizune along now.' Dinners with three people always just seemed so awkward to her.

Kakashi had watched the entire affair closely. "Well that was certainly interesting." Tsunade was still smiling slightly toward Naruto and seemed in no hurry to leave. "For what it's worth Tsunade-sama I agree with what Naruto said about Hinata and Sakura having the potential to become great iryō-nin, with the right teacher and guidance." He had planned on broaching that subject with Tsunade himself, but Naruto had beaten him to it. Used many of the same arguments Kakashi was going to as well.

"As do I Tsunade-sama. Though I'd also add Ino and Shino to the list." Tsunade had been half listening to them but turned her gaze to Asuma. "Ino for the same reason as Hinata and Sakura. She has great control over her chakra. More importantly none of the others seem the type to be interested in medical ninjutsu. As to why I suggest trying out Shino as a medic...while I know the kikaichū his clan utilize can make things tricky, their ability to neutralize poison would be quite invaluable. It may not be possible to create an antidote in the field and there may not be time to get them to a place where it can be made. It's not a problem for those bugs."

It wasn't something Tsunade had ever considered before. Probably because she herself was an expert on poisons and could whip up an antidote faster than a person could even be poisoned. Still it was an interesting idea. "Like I told the brat. If they can prove to me they're interested, then I will teach them. I have to get going now." She stared hard at both of them and let out a bit of her ample killer intent. "If anything happens to the Brat on either of your watch...don't even think of running away." She was smiling as she walked away from the two pale and frozen jōnin. 'I've still got it.'

Kakashi and Asuma continued to just stand there frozen. Eyes glazed over as they stared ahead of themselves at nothing. Visualizing the pain an angry Tsunade could inflict on them, over and over again. This was how Kurenai and the remaining three genin found them. It was difficult to bring them out of their near catatonic state. "What happened to you two?" Kurenai had finally managed to snap them out of whatever it was that had affected them.

They answered simultaneously. "Tsunade-sama."

Kurenai sighed and dragged her hand across her face. "What'd you two do?"

"We didn't do anything...she just threatened us with grave bodily harm." Kakashi was looking in Naruto's direction. He was still happily chatting with Shikamaru who was nodding every now and then. Kakashi turned his attention back toward Kurenai and her group. "Well the last three are here." He handed them each a piece of paper. "Channel your chakra into that." They all did so without any questioning. "Interesting. Another lightning user and two earth users." Kakashi pulled out three more scrolls before tossing them at the respective genin. "These jutsu are for you three. Open them and I'll be along shortly to explain more and help you get started."

Kiba eagerly opened his first. "**Raiton: Sandāboruto (Lightning Style: Thunderbolt)?**"

Chōji opened his at a sedate pace. "**Doton: Doryū Taiga (Earth Style: Great Mud River).**"

Shino was the last to open his scroll. "**Doton: Ganseki Shuriken (Earth Style: Rock Shuriken).**"

Shino thanked him for the scroll before walking off toward Naruto and Shikamaru while Chōji and Kiba continued to stand before him. "Go and read. As I said I'll be along shortly. I need to speak to Kurenai and Asuma for a moment." The two boys nodded and moved away. Kakashi turned toward Kurenai. "I'm considering taking the genin on a C-Rank."

Kurenai rose her eyebrows in surprise. "So soon?" They had been genin for little over a month. Yes, they had been pushing them hard in their training but that was hardly enough time to teach them more than the basics. "Is it wise to keep pushing them so hard?" She worried that eventually the genin would all crash and crash very hard. To the point they might break and leave the program one way or another.

"They won't be kids forever. The sooner they learn the harsh reality they truly work in the better." Kakashi had made his argument twice already and didn't want to do it a third time. Asuma nodded in agreement with Kakashi. "We either all agree to take them all or we figure out who is ready. I won't be taking any of them on a C-Rank until they've learned the jutsu I've given them."

Kurenai considered what a C-Rank would mean for them. Her biggest concern unlike the other two was that the mission could seriously break them or worse get them killed. That wouldn't be good for anyone. She knew what Asuma thought. They had discussed it a few days ago when they were out on one of their not-date dates. "When are you thinking?" As much as she was more concerned about the psychological harm of the genin she had to agree with much of Asuma's position.

Kakashi shrugged. "It depends on how long it takes them to get their jutsu to functional levels. Ideally within a week." The other two jōnin seemed surprised at his time table. "I know it's asking a lot. Especially as most of these genin haven't done any kind of elemental training before, but C-Ranks can take a while to complete. I have every intention of nominating at least three of them for the Chūnin Exams in five months." More accurately the Hokage was forcing his hand on nominating Sasuke and Naruto but the exams need three for a team at least so one of them would be nominated regardless of their readiness. It was potentially cruel and harmful, but such was the way of the world.

Kurenai and Asuma were equally as surprised by Kakashi's declaration. "You have that much faith in them Kakashi?" The question was posed by both of them.

Kakashi could only nod. "I'll admit I'm under pressure to nominate a team, but I do have faith in them. Naruto has four affinities. *Four*." He stressed the number and watched as the other jōnin's eyes widened in shock and surprise. "Exactly my reaction." The Hokage had confided in him that he planned to reveal Naruto's parentage during the exam. Not even doubting the boy would make it to the finals. "Sasuke is the last loyal Uchiha and his nomination is expected both within and beyond the Village. Those two will be in the Exams regardless of our opinion." As much as it was the jōnin's decision to nominate a team or not, they could easily be replaced or reassigned, and a temporary instructor appointed for the administrative requirements. "I plan to make sure they're ready for them. To do that I need them to go on real missions and gain real experience as shinobi."

Asuma understood the position Kakashi was in. As a genin Asuma had been in a similar situation as Sasuke. The fact that he was the Hokage's son put exceptionally high expectations on him. Not even counting the fact that he was a target simply for being born and had to be able to protect himself. "I don't envy you or them Kakashi. I'm on board with you that they need real combat experience, and if they can get these jutsu down in a week than I don't see a reason why we shouldn't go for it."

Kurenai was still on the fence. "I'll increase the training I put them through for the week and see how they handle the additional pressure *and* having to learn a new jutsu. If they succeed, and don't crack, then in a week we'll each take a team out."

Kakashi agreed with Kurenai as did Asuma. "Well then the only thing left to do is start pushing them." Kakashi found the center most point between the genin and let out a loud whistle to draw their attention. "Alright here's the deal. You all have one week to get those techniques to a functional level. The three of us have decided that if you do this then we'll take you all out on a C-Rank mission. If you can't well I guess it'll be awhile. So if you're tired of doing chores I suggest you get to work." All nine went back to what they were doing with greater determination. Kakashi walked back to the other jōnin. "At least their motivated. Now if you'll excuse me I have a few more genin to explain things to. Feel free to wander the group and offer guidance."

Kakashi moved toward where Kiba and Akamaru were. The scroll he had given Kiba was tossed to the side and Akamaru was currently sitting on it. 'No doubt Kiba gave up reading halfway through and is just trying to force the jutsu to work.' "Any questions Kiba?"

The canine like boy looked up at him. "Nah I'm good!"

Kakashi tilted his head to the side. "Really? No questions on how to do it? No wondering why I gave you this jutsu?"

Kiba shrugged. "I figure you have your reasons for all that stuff. You're the sensei and I'm the student. If I develop questions I'll ask you until then I'd rather try and do this."

Kakashi understood. Kiba was a doer. "Well then good luck." Kakashi pat Akamaru on the head before walking off toward Chōji. Said boy appeared to be reading the scroll with a slight frown on his face. "Problem Chōji?"

The boy looked up at him. "Kakashi-sensei!" He looked back down toward the scroll. "Umm I guess I'm just wondering why you picked this jutsu for me?"

Kakashi eye-smiled at him. "I know it's an usual jutsu for you but I know the greatest challenge an Akimichi faces with your techniques is hitting your target. Your attacks are very powerful, but they aren't the fastest and ideally you need your target to be distracted or restrained. That's where this comes in. With it, and depending on your creativity in its application, you'll be able to distract and potentially slow your opponent long enough to land a hit. If you were to say direct the flow of the mud toward an unmovable object like a tree or a wall and you caught your opponent they'd be momentarily pinned and have to fight to get out. That's when you hit them."

Chōji was nodding his head in understanding and acceptance. "Usually my clan works closely with the Nara so they're typically the ones to restrain our opponents that way we can hit them or capture them."

That was exactly why Kakashi was trying to break that mold and interdependency. "I know. That's why I'm making both you and Ino more self-sufficient. The jutsu I have in mind for you both will slowly but surely tear down the necessity of having you three work together to put your clan techniques to best use." Chōji couldn't help but frown at not being part of a team like his father was. "That way when you three do team up you're even more terrifying." Kakashi took a few more minutes to explain how Chōji might begin to channel his chakra to create the mud necessary before leaving him to his own devices. 'That just leaves Shino, Shikamaru, and Naruto.'

As Kakashi made his way over toward the three slightly grouped genin he could tell they were in the midst of a conversation and judging by the expressions quite a serious one. When he was near enough to maybe start overhearing some of what they were saying they immediately stopped. It was unnerving for Kakashi. The only person's mouth he could see during his approach was Shikamaru and the boy didn't say anything only communicating with his body. "Shino."

The bug user turned around to give him his full attention. "Kakashi-sensei." Shino bowed toward the teacher. "I must thank you for providing me the opportunity to learn this technique. I have already formulated several strategies based on its application and utility and plan to incorporate my kikaichū into it as well."

"I see." It wasn't exactly what Kakashi had in mind but then that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Kakashi was just more focused on giving Shino an attack with range that wouldn't endanger his hive whilst still threatening his opponent. Unlike the rest of the genin Kakashi could tell that these three already had the basic principles of their new jutsu down. "I take it you three don't need my help?"

They all shook their heads no. "This is not the first time we've learned of our affinities or the first time we've tried to learn elemental ninjutsu. Why? Because during the Academy we focused almost exclusively on our chakra control for Naruto-san's sake. However, we also wanted to be prepared for missions outside the village and the Academy three weren't enough in our estimation."

"Well then I better leave you three to your own devices. Good luck." Kakashi walked back over to the other jōnin who were still observing the genin for the time being. "I really shouldn't let myself be surprised by those three anymore," he pointed over his shoulder at the group he just left, "but I am. Naruto doesn't really surprise me, he showcased some of his arsenal during the real genin exam but the other two? To think they'd already be familiar with everything I'm trying to do here."

"I wouldn't call them all geniuses, except Shikamaru, but prodigies certainly. Whether its natural talent or their own drive is irrelevant. The three of

them are constantly pushing themselves and each other." Asuma was busy smoking as he watched some of the genin struggle and others make tiny yet giant leaps in progress. "Still if we're going to get the others read I suppose I should push them harder during weapons training. I'm sure it won't be too hard to convince Gai to stoke their youthful flames higher with some taijutsu."

Kurenai shuddered as she thought of Gai's Sunset of Youth. As skilled as she was in genjutsu she just couldn't figure out how the hell Gai made that illusion seem so real all the time. "We should get to helping them." She started walking toward Hinata being the one the girl was most comfortable around. 'And I need a distraction from the horrifying image in my head.' Kakashi and Asuma nodded and walked off toward the others to observe and maybe offer helpful advice.

The week Kakashi had given the genin was nearing its end and the three jōnin had been astounded by the progress the genin were making. Though it wasn't perfect and they all doubted they'd get their respective techniques to combat readiness they were still leaning on taking them on a higher ranked mission. "Given the work ethic we've seen I don't think we can afford to not take them on a C-Rank." Kakashi tossed back the drink in his hand and looked at the other jōnin. They had met up at a bar that catered almost exclusively to shinobi to discuss the future and their progress.

Asuma blew out a puff of smoke toward Kakashi much to the man's annoyance and Asuma's amusement. "Even Sakura has been pushing herself. Harder than any of us have had to since we started this. I have to agree with Kakashi on this one."

Gai let out a loud bellowing laugh. "Yes! All of their flames are burning brightly with the passion of youth!" Sakura had surprised him one day by asking him for additional training that would help build her endurance better. It had been quite the surprise and completely out of left field. Gai was not usually one to hold a grudge so he agreed wholeheartedly. "It is why I have decided if your genin go out on their first C-Rank then my students will join them!"

Kurenai was happy to hear that. If they could include a more experienced genin on each team it would reduce the overall risk. "That's good news. If it's alright with you Gai," she looked over toward Kakashi and Asuma, "and you two as well, I think we should split your team up and mix our genin in with them. Since your genin have experience on missions outside the village they'll be in a better position to provide an example to our genin." That was the goal at least. It's always a challenge to set a proper example and the likes of Neji really shouldn't be anywhere near a leadership position. "But since there's four teams and three experienced genin, the genin we think are the least prepared should be on a team with one of Gai's genin."

"I can agree with that. Assuming of course Gai's genin are up to the challenge." Kakashi's voice was playful and teasing while his eye danced mischievously. Gai immediately went on a tirade about how youthfully his students were before promising perfection and some insane punishment for anything less. Kakashi however, was focused on their first C-Rank. When things inevitably go wrong, as they always do on the first C-Rank, Gai's students would be thrust into a quasi-leadership position. It wouldn't do for those three to freeze up. Kakashi returned to his stoic and serious countenance. "This'll be their first mission outside the village so you all know what that means."

Asuma set down his own drink and chuckled. "I didn't think you'd be one to believe in superstitions like that Kakashi."

Kakashi had reason to believe in it. His experience was very demonstrative of the curse. It may have been war so surprises were to be the norm as opposed to the occasion, but their first mission outside the Village on Team Minato had been disastrous. Deadly and disastrous. Sure Kakashi had technically been a jōnin but he was still very much a child. Rin and Obito had never even stepped foot outside Hi no Kuni (Land of Fire) and then they were sent on mission deep into Kusagakure (Hidden Grass) to destroy a bridge vital for the supply trains. It did not start or end well. "Better safe than dead." Kakashi ultimately just shrugged Asuma's jibe off.

"In any event tomorrow is the last chance they have to finish their techniques then the next day we'll take them out. Only light training tomorrow. Don't want them to be exhausted on their first mission. Agreed?" Two nods were the response from Kurenai and Asuma. Kakashi wasn't surprised when Gai didn't nod in agreement. "I don't expect you to hold your team back Gai, they've been at this a year longer than ours, and you know them better than I."

Gai laughed loudly and smiled at Kakashi. "Do not worry my Eternal Rival! I have no doubt your youthful students will rise to the occasion and put an end to this unyouthful talk of curses!" He slapped Kakashi on the back unintentionally spilling the drink in Kakashi's hand.

Kakashi just looked at his spilled drink with a small frown. "I won't count my chickens until they hatch. Mock me all you want one of the missions will go sideways faster than you think." Kakashi stood up having heard enough and enjoyed enough socializing. The other jōnin continued talking about this and that while mixing in talking, or bragging as he thought, about the genin. His thoughts had been too focused elsewhere to continue with any idle chit-chat. If he had to sum up his problems in one word it would be 'Naruto.'

The boy seemed genuine enough when he spoke with him and had been spot on about Kakashi when he was in ANBU. That was the real problem for Kakashi. Naruto knew him. And not in a way that any report or record would indicate. Naruto *knew* him. Kakashi has spent his entire life being unreadable and yet Naruto had seen what it took others years to recognize, and the boy hadn't even known him for longer than a month. 'Something isn't adding up.' Lots of things weren't adding up about Naruto for Kakashi. The boy was talented. Too talented for having nobody to help him much of his life. Too talented to believe that he had hidden his true abilities for years.

Then there was the way Naruto acted around people. Kakashi knew better than most that Naruto had reason to be suspicious of people. But the way he acted around the other genin, children he has spent years with, was odd. None of them really seemed to notice Naruto. 'Except for Sakura, Hinata, and his two accomplices.' Kakashi was certain that whatever was going on Shino and Shikamaru were in on it. Which begged another question. When and how had they met? Supposedly they had been friends for years before graduating. Naruto was good at getting away from people, not so good that he'd evade observation for years. His excuse was also flimsy. 'Nobody pays attention to the Aburame anyway. Naruto could hang a giant sign that reads 'Naruto is right here!' and nobody would notice.'

Too many little things about Naruto bothered Kakashi. He didn't think they boy was a threat. Naruto certainly had had chances to lash out dangerously and never done so. Still it unnerved him not knowing. Kakashi was one of the best at what he does so the fact that somebody 14 years his junior was capable of deceiving him so well was frightening. 'Then again he hasn't done so to the point I'm not suspicious.' Small victories mattered. "In any even we'll see tomorrow whether or not the kids are ready for a harder mission." Kakashi got up and executed a **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** to disappear. "Ja ne!"

Asuma took out another cigarette and lit it. "Kakashi seems...off." Asuma didn't know any other way to describe it. He continued to stare at where Kakashi had been moments ago. "And not for the usual reasons Kakashi seems off."

Gai frowned and nodded in agreement. "He's hardly spent any time at the memorial stone lately. Not that I'm complaining he always spent way too much time there in my opinion." Now Gai was thinking Kakashi wasn't spending enough time there. "Ever since he passed a team Kakashi has been changing." That had been their goal when they talked to the Sandaime to try and get Kakashi out of ANBU and into a team as a sensei. This was Kakashi's third year at testing genin and the first time a group had met his standards. "He's never late. Attentive to his students. It's very un-Kakashi like." The 'I am concerned' remained unsaid.

Asuma and Kurenai had gotten a better look at a serious Gai over the past month and it was a stark contrast between his two personalities. Since they rarely ran missions together before they all became teachers neither thought Gai could be serious about anything other than training.

Kurenai didn't know Kakashi as well as Asuma or Gai. Sure, she may have heard of him, seen him around, but Kakashi wasn't close to very many people. She and he just ran in different circles and the only real connection she had to Kakashi before this was Asuma. "Kakashi will talk if and when Kakashi wants to. For now, all we can do is focus our attention on our genin and keep an eye on him. Do either of you think Kakashi is in danger or going to endanger himself or others?" Two heads shook in the negative. "Then let him be. You both know better than I how Kakashi can be"

Asuma sighed. "In other words he'll never tell us and all we can do is be ourselves." Asuma was about to reach for another cigarette seeing as his last one burned fast but stopped himself when he saw Kurenai glare at him. "If we're potentially taking the kids out of the village tomorrow and there's this so-called curse to contend with we should be well rested." Asuma stood and downed the rest of his drink before setting the glass down. "See you both tomorrow." As soon as he was outside the bar he lit another cigarette. 'Troublesome woman. I like my smoking! Great now I sound like a Nara.' He massaged the back of his neck as he meandered his way home.

Kurenai followed behind Asuma after a few more minutes of pleasantries with Gai. She left Gai who put on a knowing smirk as she walked away. "I wonder if those two really think they're fooling anyone." Gai asked to himself but he heard a few chuckles and snorts from the shinobi around him. The not so secret 'secret' not relationship 'relationship' between Asuma and Kurenai was one of interesting debate throughout the shinobi corps. Gai thought it was silly that they tried to hide it from everybody. He settled the groups tab and made his own way home...on his hands.

Kakashi woke early the next day with one goal in mind. Scout the available missions as soon as possible and 'reserve' a couple that would be good for fresh genin. He couldn't actually stop anybody else from taking the mission but if the mission scrolls unfortunately disappeared until his teams was there to accept those exact missions well then that was just good fortune. Kakashi made himself a simple breakfast before heading over to the mission office. He wasn't surprised to see the Hokage already there waiting. "Good morning Hokage-sama." He bowed before walking over to the pile of missions and beginning to sort through the C-Ranked ones.

"Good morning to you as well Kakashi." Hiruzen was puffing on his pipe as he read over a scroll about a recent assassination request. Not really paying Kakashi any mind as he focused on the potential political implications if they were caught. "Have you decided what you're doing with your students yet?" Hiruzen had already decided who would lead the mission and would leave the final selection of personnel to him.

Kakashi set aside a simple delivery mission to Cha no Kuni (Land of Tea) before looking over at the man. "Hai. Regardless of how things go this morning I expect all of them will be going on their first foray outside the village." Seeing that the Hokage wasn't paying attention Kakashi pocketed the scroll before digging through for some more.

Hiruzen affixed his signature on the scroll and motioned for one of the ANBU to deliver it to the mission commander he had settled on. "That's good to hear. I trust things are on schedule?" He could now focus on Kakashi during his brief lull in work.

Kakashi nodded. "Things are progressing better than I anticipated and not just for the ones you're interested in. All of them are improving quite nicely." Kakashi was intentionally keeping things vague for benefit of the other people in the room not completely in the know about the Hokage's goals. "Of the two that you are concerned, one is truly remarkable. When I tested them they had four affinities? Can you imagine?" He was too focused on examining the scrolls to see half the occupants in the room stop to look at him, but he felt he was more heavily observed. Kakashi muttered under his breath, "They're quite the conundrum for better or worse." He set aside another scroll for a long-term escort and protection detail to Nami no Kuni.

Hiruzen chewed on his pipe. "Four you say?" He watched as Kakashi nodded. "Truly a surprise. And definitely unheard of." Hiruzen had spent decades learning to be proficient in each element and had the best teachers Konoha ever had to offer. The person in question would still have to spend a great deal of time learning but the natural affinity would make training in the elements easier. "Perhaps when I am retired I will steal this person from you Kakashi, at least for a short while." The chance to pass on knowledge to someone like that was irresistible to anyone.

Kakashi was reading about a simple bandit eradication mission on the border between Hi no Kuni (Land of Fire) and Kaminari no Kuni (Land of Lightning). 'A nice bloody mission will be a rude wake up call for some of these kids. Perfect.' He set it aside with the Nami escort mission. "Feel free Hokage-sama. Honestly I didn't expect being a sensei to be so much work." His own sensei hadn't had to do much for Kakashi. 'Then again I didn't expect to have twelve students at once. Teaching at the Academy must be exhausting.'

Hiruzen chuckled lightly at the man. "Well I suppose you don't have much comparison to work with. You were a natural born genius and prodigy after all. Most things probably came easily to you almost as if you had lived it all before." Kakashi nodded while he tossed aside another scroll and picked up a new one. "You also have four times the number of students to teach. I don't envy you. My own students had been enough of a handful. How is that going by the way?" He heard individual reports from each of the jōnin involved in what the elders had begun calling his 'little experiment.' But he wanted an overall evaluation of where things stood.

"I think it's working well. I may be a well-rounded individual but my experience in some fields is dwarfed by the others. We balance each other out. When the Chūnin Selection Exams get here I think you'll be very happy with the results." Kakashi set aside the last scroll he'd 'reserve' for the genin. A simple tracking and capture mission.

Hiruzen was smiling at Kakashi. "You think they'll all be entered then?"

Kakashi turned around and pocketed the remaining scrolls when his body obscured the Hokage's vision. "I do. They've all come far in a month and we still have a few months to go. Even with the potential C-Rank disrupting things they will be far better prepared than most other genin from Konoha." Kakashi wasn't exaggerating in the slightest. He had genuinely been surprised by most of the genin. "Whether or not they all pass...well that's another matter entirely."

"I look forward to seeing the results. I've never heard such high praise from you." Hiruzen let out a long puff of smoke from his pipe. "I expect all

those missions to be filled one way or another Kakashi." He had to smirk at the jōnin trying to pull one over on him. "If the genin don't go on those missions I expect you and the other jōnin to complete them regardless. Understood?"

Kakashi frowned at being caught. "Hai, Hokage-sama." He had just enough time for a visit to the memorial stone while the other jōnin settled their own thoughts on the matter. Kakashi was taking a team out and there was nothing left for him to think on. 'Plus, I need to tell sensei about his son.' He bowed to his elderly leader. "If you'll excuse me Hokage-sama I have an appointment to keep with some unruly brats." He waited for the Hokage to dismiss him before heading toward his old haunt.

Once he got there Kakashi ran his fingers across each of the names that mattered to him before resting his hand on the top of the stone. He made sure he was alone before he started his ritual. "I'm sorry I've been gone for so long, but much has happened in the past few weeks." He went on to tell Obito on how he might have to be Hokage and absently wondering what Obito would think of that. 'Idiot would probably say that I was too serious to be Hokage. Stupid Bakakashi.' The usual insult from Obito ran loud in his head and he chuckled to himself. "I miss you guys so much."

"You should see your son sensei. He's a monster. Four affinities. A kinesthetic learner like your wife. And a drive like yours." Kakashi always felt better when he came here despite the fact that he felt more like a failure when he was here, every time. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect him sensei. I'm sorry for a lot of things." He ran his fingers over Namikaze Minato and let them rest there. "But he's got people there for him now. A family. From what I can tell he's happy. He's still a kind boy if much more guarded than he was a few years back. I have no doubt you'd be proud." Kakashi spoke about everything he knew of Naruto. He knew they couldn't hear him, but it helped him to think that they would somehow hear his words. Once he was done he backed away to stare at nothing and allowed himself to think about everything. Mostly about how to staff for the upcoming missions.

That was how Kakashi would spend the next two hours before deciding to make his way to the training grounds the genin would be assembled at. The boisterousness of the area was enough to let Kakashi know they had been busy despite his absence. He hid in a tree to watch for a moment before dropping down next to the other jōnin. "Yo!"

Kurenai didn't change her stance at all. She remained standing with her arms crossed as she looked over the crowded field. "Nice of you to join us Kakashi."

Kakashi waved his hand dismissively. "Maa. I had to get to the mission office early to secure the best missions for our cute little students. Then when I was done I got lost on the road of life." It felt good to use that excuse again. The group of three looked at him but not in disbelief. They had expected something like this to happen sooner or later. To which Kakashi could only shrug. "I've already made up my mind. Hence why I chose missions and then I had to visit some old friends. So whose going?"

Gai was the one to inform Kakashi in a way only he could. "Yosh! My Eternal Rival our Youthful colleagues have decided to see how brightly our genin's flames of youth can burn!"

Kakashi nodded ignoring Gai's usual behavior. "That makes this easy then." He took out the four mission scrolls he had taken earlier. "These are the missions and how I think we should structure the teams." Kakashi had selected Sasuke, Sakura, and Lee to go on the eradication mission. Neji, Kiba, and Ino would handle the capture mission. Hinata, Chōji, and TenTen would travel to Cha no Kuni (Land of Tea). Leaving Naruto, Shikamaru, and Shino to go to Nami no Kuni (Land of Waves). The only thing he didn't think of was who would lead each mission.

The three jōnin each took one to exam it and traded with each other after they finished with one. "Are you sure about this Kakashi? Some of these missions might be too much for the ones you've selected." Kurenai was amenable to most of the decisions Kakashi made but she had to question some. "Sakura's assignment in particular concerns me."

"That's precisely why I think she needs to go on that mission. She needs to learn, truly learn, what this life will entail." Kakashi thought long and hard about where to send each one and was confident the teams would support each other. "I didn't just assign them at random but if it'll help I can run through each assignment." Kurenai and Asama motioned for him to do so.

"Alright starting with the obvious one. Bandit eradication." A small village on the border of Kaminari no Kuni and Hi no Kuni was being harassed by a group medium-sized group of bandits that seemed to cross the border regularly. The likelihood of Kumo shinobi operating in the vicinity was high. Especially in border towns where they likely commissioned Kumo as well. "Lee is the best choice to go on that mission because it will involve close quarters combat, and he's the best genin out of all of them. Hinata and Neji can't go for obvious reasons. Sakura needs to be bloodied before we can be certain she's committed to this life. And I don't trust Sasuke to go on any of the others. He'd probably get too bored on the escort run. He has no useful tracking abilities. And long-term protection with little to no chance of combat? It's a no brainer." Truthfully, he wanted a long-range fighter like TenTen, but she was needed on another mission for different reasons.

"Now the capture mission. Neji and Kiba have unique abilities that will better enable them to identify and track the target. Ino should go for the purposes of conducting a field interrogation." The man they had been sent to capture recently escaped from one of the many prisons in Hi no Kuni (Land of Fire) and the local authorities were having difficulty finding him. It was their job to not only recapture him but investigate the potential for accomplices. "The probability of combat is high but the number of combatants will be skewed in the team's favor. There is less risk than the others but it requires a set of specialized skills."

"I would have chosen Hinata to go on the tracking mission if I thought the combat wouldn't be over so quickly. The girl is still much too timid and reserved to strike at her opponents with the intent to kill. Hence why she's on the Cha no Kuni (Land of Tea) run. The likelihood of encountering bandits is higher but the number is significantly reduced compared to the situation at the border. It's much the same thinking with Chōji." Sometimes the push needed to get over the thought of violence was the thought you might lose your friends and family. "That's also why TenTen should go on that mission. She and Hinata have formed a friendship with each other, and when Hinata does have to kill for the first time TenTen will be the most likely one she seeks out." Friends were often better choices when it comes to helping each other through that than teachers. The age difference between teacher and student was greater as was the amount of experience. There were times when people subconsciously dismissed the jōnin-sensei's words for the simple fact they were older.

"Finally. Naruto, Shikamaru, and Shino were grouped together for the obvious reasons. They work well together and don't complain. Escort and protection for an indeterminate amount of time is going to be boring. If and when there's a dangerous situation they'll be able to handle it." Of all the genin here, those were the three Kakashi was least concerned about. He may not believe all of what they tell him and what he knows, but he does believe that they are better prepared than the rest. Nami (Wave) was shaping up to be the least involved of the missions but would test their ability to focus and maintain a constant readiness for a danger that may or may not come.

Kurenai relented. "Alright. You've convinced me." It was hard not to argue with Kakashi's arguments. The man clearly actually put thought and

effort into dividing them up. "The only thing left to do is choose who leads each team."

"If you don't mind I'd like to handle the tracking mission. No offense to you three but I'm the best at it out of us four, and I can give Ino a crash course on field interrogation." Kakashi's nose was just as good as an experienced Inuzuka's and much better than Kiba's at the moment, and he had conducted numerous interrogations during his time as an ANBU.

"That's fine with me. I think I should be on Hinata's mission. While I agree with your decision to pair her up with TenTen. Both Chōji and Hinata will need a motherly touch if they have to kill somebody." The two genin were very sensitive and kind people. The thought of killing undoubtedly terrifies them and the act itself may well destroy them.

"No arguments from me. If it's all the same with you Gai, I'd like to take our resident mysteries on this escort mission." Asuma had spent years standing around guarding the Daimyō during his time as a member of the Shugonin Jūnishi (Guardian Shinobi Twelve). He was used to long days with nothing to do. It would also provide Asuma the opportunity to observe the three of them in great detail. Shikamaru, Shino, and Naruto had intrigued and puzzled all the jōnin not just Kakashi.

"Yosh! I would be delighted to lead your charges on a youthful adventure with my ever-youthful student Lee!" Gai bellowed and entered his Nice Guy pose complete with tooth sparkle. Once he had calmed down he brought up the one nagging issue he had. "Though I doubt I am suitable to help Sakura deal with the harsh reality of our line of work." Gai was of course a dedicated and serious shinobi but his personality was an acquired taste. "Are you certain you want young Sasuke to venture so close to Kumo's territory?" They had made a grab for the Hyūga, twice, why not the last Uchiha? It would be an even greater coup than nabbing an unsealed Hyūga.

It was a legitimate concern. Knowing Sasuke as they did the boy would probably chase after somebody at the first hint of mockery or insult toward himself or his clan. Easy to manipulate. The Uchiha already had a reputation and since Sasuke loves to broadcast his heritage it was only a matter of time before somebody engages with him. "I'd like to believe the Hyūga affair was the fault of the Sandaime Raikage and that the Yondaime Raikage wouldn't try anything like that." Kakashi said as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "He'll have Gai with him that should dissuade any funny business." Thankfully Gai also has a reputation. "Plus, Sasuke doesn't have the Sharingan so there's less value in taking him at moment. Any other concerns?" He was met by three heads shaking no. "Then let's get this started."

Kakashi took a few steps to place himself in front of the other jōnin who stood in a line behind him and let out a loud whistle to get everyone's attention. "Form up on me, now!" He waited for all twelve genin to line up after encouraging them to hustle. "Good news for all of you. We have decided that the nine of you are ready for your first C-Rank." There were a series of shouts and cheers from the more vocal members of the group. "Gai has also decided that you three," he gestured toward Neji, Lee, and TenTen, "would be split between the teams." Lee and TenTen nodded but Neji was rolling his eyes and scoffed. "Now pay attention as I call out your assignment. Once we're done here we'll go over mission parameters after we meet with the Hokage." They had to keep things official after all. "Shikamaru, Shino, and Naruto you're going with Asuma. Kiba, Neji, Ino you three are coming with me. Hinata, Chōji, and TenTen with Kurenai. Leaving Sasuke, Sakura, and Lee with Gai." There was some squealing and moaning about being grouped with Sasuke from Sakura and Ino respectively which Kakashi did his best to ignore. "Meet with your assigned team and leader. Dismissed."

Yep. They're going to Wave. I'm a sellout. Well that was another doozy of a chapter. I don't seem to be making myself any more or less consistent but whatever. The next series of chapters will cover the respective missions. I honestly wasn't trying to group Shikamaru, Shino, and Naruto in for Wave but it just happened, and it made me laugh. Perhaps my subconscious set things up this way who knows.

I tried to do a better job with the learning the jutsu thing but I couldn't really find some good explanations of how so for the moment until I do I'm going to chalk one up for ninja magic and leave it at that.

[illegible]

Great news! I still don't own Naruto. The legacy is safe.

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

Asuma watched as the large group broke off into four smaller ones. The field they were on was large enough so as to not be overheard. Not that any missions they were going on were classified but it helped to train mission protocol early. Asuma pulled out his lighter and lit another cigarette. "Gather round you three." The mission seemed simple enough so Asuma was planning on letting one of the genin lead it. He flipped his lighter open and closed a few times as he waited for the three boys to make their way over. "Come on now, hustle. We're burning daylight." Shino and Naruto kicked into a light jog.

Shino and Naruto shared a look with each other and silently communicated what they had already decided. Seeing as they were in agreement they looked to Shikamaru. "No! You can't do this to me Ruto!" Naruto started smirking at him. "Come on why me?! You know I hate working...isn't it bad enough I'm already so un-lazy? You can't mean to tell me that you're going to make me do this!"

Asuma too ignored the outrage and arguing from the Nara. "Explain your reasoning."

Shino pushed his sunglasses back up to cover his eyes. "He is the smartest one out of all of us. A natural born strategist. Our combined IQs *might* be able to equal his." He spared another glance at Shikamaru. "In addition, it's highly amusing to watch him behave this way." To which the Nara could only feign betrayal while Naruto smirked and nodded.

Asuma nodded thoughtfully. "I agree with you on all points." He turned his attention to the pouting Nara. "Congratulations Shikamaru you're the team leader for this escort mission."

Shikamaru groaned. "Fine! Give me the damn scroll sensei." He held out his hand expectantly and waited until he felt the scroll fall into his head. "Nami no Kuni (Land of Waves)? Great...that means at least a week of traveling at a civilian pace!" Shikamaru groaned again. "It also means encountering the Demon Brothers and eventually the Kirigakure no Kijin (Demon of the Hidden Mist). Why do I feel like this is somehow Naruto's fault? They would have to meet and come up with a plan. Naruto liked Zabuza and Haku and probably wouldn't be willing to let them die this time around. "On the bright side if we can convince this Tazuna person to let Naruto help build his damnable bridge we should be able to speed up the process cut down on the overall mission length. Maybe even convince him to let you secure his legacy with some fūinjutsu."

Naruto had perked up at hearing they'd be the ones to go to Wave Country. "If he can pay for it. Fūinjutsu isn't cheap Shika. But I don't mind a little manual labor." Which was doubtful. Wave was being strangled by Gatō. 'We'll have to work out a better deal for Konoha as well.' The country itself was still turning a profit given its strategic position as a neutral port between two of the Great Nations. The problem being those profits weren't making it to the rest of the population.

"It'll be troublesome, but we'll undoubtedly have to split up eventually. Since this isn't just an escort mission but long-term protection that means we'll need to protect the client's family, assuming he has one, at the same time." It helped knowing most of what would happen but for Asuma's sake they had to play as if they knew nothing. "I don't like that. Splitting the team is always dangerous. Even a civilian can kill a shinobi given the right circumstances." He put the scroll away and sighed. "Well, right now a lot of this is just speculation. Can't be sure we'll have anybody of intelligence to concern ourselves with, or that he even has a family."

Asuma was giddy with anticipation at seeing how this plays out. Aside from learning more about the three genin he'd get a front row seat to how they operate as a unit. "If there's nothing else you want to discuss let's go meet the client and *officially* accept the mission." Leave it to Kakashi to do things in unorthodox ways. Asuma found the walk to the mission office relatively normal. Aside from the discussion of Shino's hive. Imagine his surprise when he learned Shino had not one but two hives. A difficult feat to accomplish. From what he knew most species the Aburame bonded with were exceptionally territorial when it comes to their hosts so to find two species in one host was surprising. More so given it was of a breed of insect most Aburame steered clear of because of their aggressiveness and the difficulty of controlling them. 'As if the normal kikaichū weren't enough of a handful.'

"Hokage-sama." Asuma bowed to his father. "Team Asuma junior here for a C-Rank assignment." Unlike Kakashi who constantly combined the genin's names to form a team designation, Asuma preferred to use a modified designation. Since most team names changed from their numbered designator to the captain's name after the first genin became a chūnin it seemed simpler to just do that. This was the first time Asuma had seen his father in a while. Training the genin and training himself kept him busy, and they weren't that close to begin with. "I heard you had a run in with Tsunade-sama. You don't seem too worse for wear."

The memory of his latest visit from Tsunade resurfaced and he grimaced. He had expected anger and a violent 'training session' with his only female student. What he got was much worse. Much worse indeed. Tsunade had not beaten him to a bloody pulp but instead lectured him about how disappointed her grandfather and granduncle would have been. Her words about why she didn't react violently still haunted him.

"It wouldn't be enough to hurt you physically. The physical pain would momentarily block out the shame you feel and allow a hint of redemption enter your psyche. You don't deserve that sensei. This is a much more fitting punishment. Knowing exactly how much you've disappointed them. I wonder if you would have behaved the way you have if it was Mito and not Naruto who was the cursed one." Tsunade looked at Hiruzen with nothing but apathy. "Now if you'll excuse me Jiraiya has to get double the beating since I won't hit you." She may not have hit him but Jiraiya would definitely end up in the hospital and she had no intention of speeding up his recovery. 'It's nice being the head of the hospital for once.' On her way out she picked up a chair and threw it just so it would miss the Hokage's head. 'Still have a reputation to live up to.'

The Hokage folded his hands over one another choosing to ignore discussing Tsunade. "Asuma. Kakashi was just here for the same thing. I take it then you have a mission in mind for them?" Hiruzen wasn't going to cause a fuss over Kakashi swiping a few scrolls. He had staffed the missions and that was all that mattered in the end. 'I do wish my former teammates would quit being so averse to change.' While he had certainly managed to clean up the council by replacing most of the civilian side with people who truly worked to better the village, he could not replace those three so easily. It was frustrating, and despite his somewhat improved relationship with Danzō it was still a far cry from how things should be.

Asuma filed away the Tsunade issue for later. "I have. My team will take the escort mission to Nami no Kuni (Land of Waves)."

Hiruzen nodded and turned to one of the chūnin in the room. "Please go and bring Tazuna-san here." The chūnin silently disappeared a moment later. Hiruzen opened his eyes to look directly at Asuma. "The client is withholding something about the nature of the mission." Tazuna had been far too evasive with some of their questions for his liking and the lack of specificity was bothersome. "Keep a watchful eye." There had been nothing suspicious in the latest intelligence reports about Nami but that in itself was suspicious. There was always something happening everywhere. Despite his suspicion Tazuna had paid for an escort so an escort he would receive. He couldn't turn down missions just because he had a bad feeling.

"Understood." Asuma wasn't overly concerned about what he had just been told. Nevertheless, he would maintain vigilance. It wouldn't do for any of them to die on this mission. "Anything in particular bothering you or is this more of a general warning?" His question was met with silence. "Right. Something bothers you, but you don't know what." There was nothing left to say or do until the client arrived. He lit another cigarette having stopped keeping track of the number long ago.

Naruto and the others had been silent since they entered already being aware of what would happen and who they're client would be. For Naruto though going to Nami offered an opportunity he hoped to capitalize on. It would delay their return and therefore would need the Hokage's approval lest they all be labeled as missing-nin for failing to return. "Hokage-sama." Naruto waited until the man's eyes met his. "I would like to make a request."

"What can I do for you Naruto-kun?" It had been a great while since Naruto asked for anything. He hoped it was something reasonable and therefore within his power to grant.

"Nami no Kuni is not that far from Uzu no Kuni (Land of Whirlpools)." He ignored the unconscious tensing of the Hokage's shoulders. "After our mission in Nami I would like to visit the ruins. Both to see my family's ancestral home and to see if anything survived the destruction." It had been picked clean of anything of value in his time but that didn't mean there wasn't something there now, but he doubted there'd be much of anything. Still the potential gains were worth any risk in his mind.

Hiruzen's thoughts were mirroring Naruto's to a degree. Part of him wanted to refuse outright saying it was too dangerous, which it was. The reason Uzu stood for so long was because of its position. An island chain surrounded by whirlpools was a fearsome and dauntless natural boundary. Some claimed the whirlpools were alive and that they moved. Others that the whirlpools were the result of some secret technique lost to the ages. Regardless, Uzu and more specifically the Uzumaki were well known for their fūinjutsu a difficult and practically lost art. "I will allow you to go after the successful completion of your mission, but the jōnin captain has the final say in the field."

Naruto nodded and was grateful for the opportunity. He would have communicated that gratitude had the door not been thrown open by an older man who reeked of alcohol. 'Some things never change it seems.'

The man in question took another swig from his half empty bottle before looking at the escort he had been assigned. "Really? You're sticking me with these brats? They don't even look like shinobi!" His eyes roamed over all of them and the look in his eyes conveyed shock and fear that nothing more than children would be responsible for his survival. "Especially the funny looking blonde one. Is he really a shinobi? And why is he smiling like an idiot?"

Naruto couldn't help smiling despite the insult. Hearing Tazuna be the same grouchy old man he remembered was comforting. The family was always kind to him and hadn't asked when he needed a place to stay for a little while. They just welcomed him and treated him like family. Still he needed a way out but Tazuna had provided him the ammunition necessary. "You don't think we're shinobi?" Tazuna shook his head no. "Good. Let's hope whoever we run into thinks the same thing. It'll be so much easier to kill them if they don't think we're a threat. For example," he pulled out a kunai and tossed it at Tazuna's bottle which was currently pouring more of its contents into the man's mouth. The kunai hit the bottle, shattering it, and embedded itself in the wall in the hallway, "if that had been a little more to the left we wouldn't be having anymore conversations."

Asuma and Shikamaru both pinched the bridge of their noses in exasperation much to Naruto's amusement. "Naruto, you can't go around threatening to kill the client." Asuma shook his head at Naruto's casual dismissal of his chastisement while Shikamaru groaned. Asuma addressed Tazuna next. "Naruto is right though, you shouldn't underestimate these three just because they appear to be children. In any case I'm a jōnin, an experienced shinobi. In the event they can't handle something that's why I'm here."

Tazuna nodded but couldn't help but look sadly and with some fear at where his bottle had just been and the knife that had almost hit him. Lastly, he looked at his precious whiskey that now adorned the floor. "What a waste. At least the brat seems capable enough." He chuckled nervously. "There's no need for that. I am the super awesome bridge builder Tazuna. I expect to get home safely."

"You three go pack for at least a three-month mission and meet me at the main gate in one hour." The three genin nodded and left the room. Asuma didn't plan for the mission to last that long but preferred over preparedness to under. "I'll escort you back to your hotel, so you can prepare for the journey Tazuna-san." Since his father was voicing his unease it was prudent to stick to the client like glue. 'And we can have a nice friendly chat along the way.'

Naruto and Shikamaru were packing for at least an A-Rank mission. "I'm going to stop by one of the banks and try to withdraw some money once I'm done here." Naruto knew that the easiest way to stop Zabuza was going to be money. The man still had a strong desire to finish what he started. The money at least might buy them some time to talk. What they talked about was yet to be debated.

"Are you sure that's wise? The amount of money you'd need to get Zabuza's attention will not be small." No matter how skilled a person was, carrying around that kind of money was going to draw attention and lower the intelligence of people. An otherwise normal and friendly fellow will become your worst nightmare for the right price. Zabuza was a jōnin once upon a time, and a member of the Kiri no Shinobigatana Shichinin Shū (Seven Ninja Swordsman of the Mist). His price tag would be high, very high.

Naruto shrugged off Shikamaru's concern. "You forget the magic of fūinjutsu Shika. So long as its sealed away safely into my arm nobody is going to know anything." Except the people at the bank, but that's why there were a select few banks managed by retired and active shinobi. It was a very private affair banking in a shinobi village. "Besides until we can decide *what* exactly we're going to do about Zabuza and Haku I'd rather plan for any eventuality." They weren't doing much actual packing. Merely grabbing scrolls that they had already prepared for the appropriate rank of the mission and transferring their contents into their packs or other scrolls. There was no sense wasting time gathering what was needed if you get a time sensitive mission. A shinobi should be ready within a moment's notice. Ordinarily they'd simply carry everything in scrolls, but one doesn't always have time to reach for a scroll in combat. Things like food and clothes would stay, but weapons and medical supplies would not.

"Speaking of what to do. What are we going to do?" Shikamaru didn't have the same attachment to Zabuza and Haku that Naruto did. Hell, Shikamaru didn't think *anybody* had any attachment to those two.

Naruto shrugged again. "I don't know yet, but we should wait for Shino. No use discussing the same points twice." He put the last few items into his pack and pouches before throwing the bag over his shoulder and onto his back where it would stay for the next few hours. "I know one thing though. I don't want them to die. Meet at the gate?" Naruto didn't see much point in coming back just to leave again immediately.

Shikamaru nodded. "Before you even think of running off to rob the bank you know damn well our parents are going to have a talk with us." Shikamaru smiled as Naruto rubbed the back of his head forgetting that fact. One way or another Shikaku and Yoshino were going to be Naruto's parents and Shikamaru preferred to take the easiest path. He grabbed his own pack and turned Naruto around shoving him out the door. "Come on. It'll be a drag but the sooner we're done with them the sooner we can get going."

Shikamaru watched as Naruto bounced happily, but subtly, as they made their way toward the kitchen where his parents were waiting. He wasn't as excited about it as Naruto was. Shikamaru knew that his mother would be in full blown mother-bear mode and be threatening to kill them if they even thought about getting hurt on this mission while his father wisely nodded along to spare himself any pain.

True enough as soon as they entered the kitchen they were met with a silent and uncomfortable Shikaku who kept looking at his wife, and a very serious looking woman. "Sit down you two." The two boys both silently took a seat between them both. "Now don't go thinking because you're being taken on a mission outside the village that you're the hottest thing since sliced bread. I expect you both back here in one piece with the same quantity of blood that you left with understood?" Her eyes promised pain if there was a single hair out of place. Yoshino watched them both nod fervently.

Shikamaru couldn't help but think that Naruto was going to say something smart like, 'Does the blood have to be in our body?' Thankfully he didn't look ready to speak but he wouldn't put it past the blonde.

"I said is that clear?!" Yoshino couldn't stop herself from having a little fun with them, and it helped calm her nerves.

"Yes kaa-san!" They both shouted out of fear.

Yoshino smiled then. "Good." She gave them both a hug and kissed the tops of their heads. "Be safe. Watch out for each other and your teammates. And come back." That was all she would ever ask of her family. That they come back. She may have retired to run the house and compound because Shikaku couldn't or wouldn't but that didn't mean she forgot what it was like in the world. All she wanted was her family alive. Unhurt is better, but she'd settle for alive. "Your turn Shikaku."

The man had been silent and let his wife do all the talking, as was the norm. "Do you have everything?" Two nods. "Enough to last in the event of chaos?" Two more nods. "Are you going to listen to your mother." Two frantic nods. "Then I wish you luck and try to enjoy yourselves, but not to the point you'd endanger yourself, your team, or your charge." He wanted badly to grab them both and never let go, but he couldn't. It didn't matter if they had already been through a war and done something ludicrous like throw themselves back in time. He was their father and it was in the job description to fret over them. Even if he wouldn't express it the same way Yoshino did he was worried. Not because they weren't ready, but because he couldn't help himself. 'Fatherhood is troublesome.'

Yoshino watched with a sad heart as they put on their sandals and left through the door closing it behind them. "I know they'll be okay, but I still worry Shikaku. They're so young. Is it wrong for me to want them to stay little forever?" The only reaction she had to her husband moving to stand behind her was to sink into the embrace he wrapped her in.

"No. Sadly in our world it's the children who have to pay for our inability to make things better. But you don't have to worry, they'll come back. Kami knows you'd drag their asses back from wherever they end up before berating them for making you drag them back in the first place." His wife may have been the most troublesome person he'd ever encountered, but he loved her. Truly. He couldn't imagine a life without her.

Yoshino snorted at her husband. "You're right, of course." She couldn't help but roll her eyes at saying that. Telling a Nara their right is like saying the sky is blue. "I knew there was a reason I married you." She pulled away and turned to look at her husband. "Now don't you go thinking for one second that because I'm worried about our boys that you can get away with anything! Now I'm going to visit Shino's mother and I expect this place to be cleaned and dinner to be on the table when I get back!" She walked out of the with a smile. Yoshino loved her family greatly, and that was precisely why she enjoyed teasing and embarrassing them.

As soon as she was gone Shikaku sighed and let out his usual mantra. "Troublesome woman."

Shino was also having a talk with his parents about his first out of village mission. His mother had not stopped hovering since he came home. Not that he would begrudge her that. She was not of the Aburame and was one of the few who did not outright find their relationship with their insects disturbing. She was in fact envious of the close bond they share. "Mother I will be fine. Your worry is unnecessary. I am going on a mission with an experienced jōnin and two of my closest companions."

His mother may not have been an Aburame before, but she had adopted many of their mannerisms after such prolonged exposure. "Your wife will do the same to your children one day Shino-kun. Indulge me."

He wanted to argue with her, but he couldn't. Many things she may have adopted but her constant worry about her children had not faded. Of course, he knew all parents worried needlessly he just wanted to unburden her even slightly. "Very well Kaa-san."

The woman smiled and resumed going through the contents of the scrolls Shino had pulled out. Being an active duty shinobi, she was surprised by the amount of supplies her son was taking. "Do you truly need all of this? You're going on a low rank mission outside the village, not a war."

Shino pushed his sunglasses back up onto his nose. "It never hurts to be overprepared. One of my teammates can be forgetful and there are no guarantees within or beyond these walls. I would hate to find myself short on supplies. Besides as most of this will be stored within a scroll I will not be overburdened." He would not reveal to her that he knew this mission was not a C-Rank. He was certain she would coddle him as soon as he got back and she found out.

"A wise precaution wouldn't you say Shiori?" Shino's father had silently joined them and looked over the assembled equipment as well. He silently approved of his son's forethought. His eyebrows unconsciously twitched upward at seeing one peculiar container which he pointed at. "Why do you have that?"

"Tou-sama?" Shino was confused. The container his father pointed at contained the necessary nutrients to feed his rinkaichū in the event they could not find food in the wild. "Apologies. I thought I had informed you of my bonding with a colony of that particular breed."

Shibi's brow furrowed again at his son. "You are bonded with two species?" He did not ever remember having a conversation with his son about that. It was dangerous to attempt. If either queen rejected the proposal it could be disastrous especially for the host. "When did this occur?" He was concerned but now that he was focusing on his son he could tell neither species was in danger of going out of control and destroying Shino from the inside out. They seemed to have developed a symbiotic relationship with each other. Though they were still carefully segregated within his son.

"The process began many years ago. My prolonged association with Torune predisposed me to the rinkaichū. I found that breed to be a potential source of strength for my hive. The queen agreed and approved an additional bonding to augment my abilities." It had taken many years for the insects to establish a symbiotic relationship within him and with each other. It had not been pleasant at times. The two colonies briefly competed with each other and exhausted him frequently. "I am certain I told you two years ago that I had successfully bred a small colony."

Shibi was frowning. He didn't remember anything of the sort, and he was certain he would have. He could count the number of Aburame successfully bonding with the rinkaichū on both hands and have fingers to spare. His son also had two queens within him in apparent harmony. It unnerved him to have no recollection of these events. More so that he could not recall this Torune person his son spoke of. "I see. Do well on your mission." Despite his concerns and lack of memory he felt immense pride in his son. Barely even a genin and already surpassing many of his clansmen. "I have other matters to attend to. Listen to your mother and be safe." He briefly rested his hand on Shino's shoulder. It was a very emotional behavior for him to engage in. Shibi nodded to his family and left. He did not doubt his son's sincerity that he informed him, still he could not remember. He would consult a Yamanaka and go looking for this Torune.

Shiori was smiling as her husband left. "I do so enjoy seeing your father express himself. More so when he expresses himself to you, Shino." She handed Shino his coat and watched as he put it on. "Trust your teammates and obey your sensei. And remember the wor..."

"The world is full of many perils. The only thing that will stand in your way is self-doubt. I remember." He finished sealing the unnecessary supplies into their respective scrolls. "As for my teammates, I trust no two people more than them. They are my comrades and an extension of my hive. We will be fine." Shino allowed his mother to caress his face. She was one of the few people he allowed to touch him without complaint.

Even though she didn't understand when and how her son became so close with two other people she did not know that well it didn't matter. Her son was much happier around them and that was enough for her. "Invite them to dinner again soon. Their company was pleasant." As much as Shiori loved her family it was nice to socialize with other people every now and then. To remind her how to behave and interact with others. "I look forward to hearing of your success."

"I will return as soon as I am able mother." Shino let himself be hugged one last time before he left his home. As he walked away from his home his thoughts were troubled by his father's lack of recollection. He *knew* he had told his father of his bonding with a small colony of rinkaichū not long after they arrived. For his father not to remember meant somebody had manipulated his memories. It had happened before, so it wasn't impossible for it to happen again, but it was concerning. It was obvious to him Danzō was being more cautious than usual. 'No doubt he has placed discreet surveillance on the three of us.'

They disliked Root shinobi for the simple fact they were difficult to detect. Naruto's sensing mostly relied on emotion and the emotionless Root negated that benefit. Root also underwent extreme levels of stealth training. He could literally be walking atop a line of Root shinobi right now and not know it. His insects could easily locate them if he was willing to let them swarm around him, but that would raise questions that would cast him into a position of distrust and suspicion. The Village may not interfere in intra and inter clan business, but they did indeed regulate everyday activity within the village. There were a number of laws that specifically prevented clans from using their special abilities within the village outside of extenuating circumstances, war, or self-defense.

On the bright side his father's lack of memory will only help them move against Danzō. 'If, for whatever reason, my father does not remember his own nephew he will become an unstoppable force.' Shino knew that his father would assume somebody killed his nephew and didn't want him to remember, and that would not sit well. He only hoped his father would not go at it alone as was typical.

The Aburame lived on the outer fringes of Konoha making his journey to the gate a short one. He saw Shikamaru already there leaning against the wall. 'Likely asleep.' Shino silently moved to stand next to him and patiently wait for the rest of their team. He was surprised to not see Naruto here waiting with Shikamaru and was about to disturb his slumber when he seemingly woke up. 'If he was asleep to begin with.'

"Naruto went to the bank, or so he says." It was hard to know what Naruto actually did when he was on his own. Not that that was a problem. He

trusted Naruto not to do anything too stupid. "Something about trying to pay Zabuza off."

"I see." It made sense to Shino. Nukenin were motivated by profit, most of the time. "Then it is fortunate that he is the only surviving member of his family." He certainly couldn't withdraw the amount of money Zabuza would need without people noticing and growing curious. 'I doubt even Naruto-san can do that without being noticed.' Still since it was his and only his money in the end what other people thought mattered little. They could complain all the want. "Did Naruto-san say anything else?"

Shikamaru yawned and stretched his slightly cramped muscles. "Only that he doesn't want them to die." Intelligent Naruto may be, but he was not a strategist. A tactician for sure, but a strategist no. Naruto preferred simple plans and to wing the execution of that plan. "I love Naruto, but I'd like to have an actual plan for once."

Shino nodded. "Agreed. What are our options?"

Shikamaru had a few ideas none of them great. All of them next to impossible to pull off. The thought made him sigh. "Nothing good. The way I see it we have three options." Naruto wouldn't really be upset at not being apart of the discussion so long as we had a plan that could work.

"Option One, and probably the worst option, we tell Zabuza of the rebellion in Kiri and convince him to go back and fight." It was exactly what Zabuza wanted. The problem was they didn't know where, when, how, or who was involved in the rebellion. Only that one took place. It might be underway, be over, or take another year to begin. They didn't know. "Aside from the obvious issues as soon as Zabuza sets foot in Kiri the Hunter Teams would be on him. With no way to help him find the right people it's the least viable of the 'good' options." Despite the cooperation between all the Great Nations during the Fourth Great War, Kiri was still very secretive about the rebellion. It also hadn't been a major priority at the time so nobody bothered to dig too deeply.

"Option Two, we pay Zabuza to leave Tazuna alone and kill Gatō instead." From what little information Naruto had given him Zabuza was never paid by Gatō so technically speaking did not *officially* work for the man. Thus negating potential concerns about Zabuza's honor. Even nukenin had to be concerned about their reputation. "This works out best for us. Gatō is gone, Tazuna and Wave prosper, and Zabuza goes on his merry way." This was the most likely event Shikamaru saw happening. "Downside of course being Zabuza is still hunted by Kiri and they will both inevitably die at some point." Nobody can run away forever.

"Option Three, the least likely but most preferable of them all. We do Option Two but get Zabuza and Haku to return to Konoha with us." Adding shinobi like Zabuza and Haku to the ranks would benefit the village greatly. There was no better swordsman in the shinobi world outside the Seven Swordsman, and Haku's Hyōton would bring another Kekai Genkai into the village. 'If there's one thing every village loves its Kekai Genkai.' Except the Obito'd version of Kiri. "Haku's position as the last member of his clan does give us some more room to operate perhaps even enough to secure them both a chance at being welcomed in." Haku's situation was less of a concern. Since he was never a shinobi of any village and its doubtful anybody knows of him, ingratiating him will be a non-issue. "It's a political nightmare on top of a political powder keg but the boons are greater." Taking in foreign shinobi was always a nightmare.

The stigma associated with missing-nin hardly meant anything. Missing-nin and other mercenaries were hired by countries big and small all the time. They made wonderful scapegoats, patsies, assassins, and everything else associated with shinobi work but came unburdened from loyalties to any nation. As far as the villages were concerned if they could get a rogue into their village than one nation's trash is another nation's treasure. The only issue arose when one nation was upset that their former shinobi joined one of their enemies.

Even so Zabuza is accused, and guilty, of high treason for trying to assassinate the Yondaime Mizukage. His motives didn't matter. The Mizukage's actions didn't matter. All that mattered was that Zabuza tried to kill his Kage. That would make incorporation into any village a political and logistical nightmare. The established shinobi and Kage would undoubtedly be suspicious of his loyalty.

Shino hadn't seen any other alternative that ended with both Zabuza and Haku still being alive, except one. "We could always capture them and drag them back to Konoha." It wasn't the best option either, but it'd ensure their survival at least until Ibiki or Anko had extracted all the information of value from them both. It would also save them lots of money. Naruto may have it in abundance, but all wells eventually run dry.

Shikamaru wanted to avoid any situation that brought them back as prisoners. Haku would survive, at least until he had produced enough offspring with his bloodline and then he'd be disposed of. The new Yuki clan would grow believing in and being fervently loyal to Konohagakure and Hi no Kuni. Zabuza would either be imprisoned or executed. His sword would either be kept hidden or returned to Kiri which would pay exuberantly for the return of the Kubikiribōchō. "That should be a last resort."

"What should be a last resort?" Naruto was strolling happily toward them. His visit to the bank had been successful and he was confident that he'd at least be able to buy some time to talk with Zabuza. If they still had to fight afterward well that'd be unfortunate but such is the world at times. He may have wanted them both to live but if they both had to die then that's just the way it was.

Shikamaru looked up to see his favorite blonde walking over to them. "Just trying to figure out what to do about your troublesome friends." He found himself staring a bit longer than usual. Despite seeing Naruto every day, he had to acknowledge that his improved diet and training had been doing wonders for Naruto's form. 'Not that Naruto was ever bad to look at.' Naruto's parents weren't exceptionally tall, but Naruto hadn't even grown to be taller than his mother. That wasn't the case anymore. Naruto was still growing but was much taller than he had been before. No longer was he the runt of the litter so to speak.

A combination of starvation and Kyūbi had consumed whatever baby fat might have remained years ago. All that remained was a figure that looked healthy. His skin wasn't taut like it was trying to strangle him anymore. If anything, his color glowed more than it did before. Everything about him just radiated life at this point.

"Ne stop staring Shika." Naruto noticed the thousand-yard stare. "Unless you plan on doing something." He muttered it under his breath but saw Shikamaru's lips twitch upward ever so slightly. "So any ideas?" Shikamaru came over and whispered in his ear and what he said made his face redden faster than Hinata used to do whenever Naruto spoke to her. "Not about that pervert!" He pouted when Shikamaru laughed. Still if Shikamaru was serious he'd have to consider it. "I meant about Zabuza and Haku!"

Shino shook his head. He had grown accustomed to their antics by now. Shikamaru and Naruto would invariably end up trying to embarrass the other at some point. 'That's another point for Shikamaru.' Naruto may be the Prankster King, but Shikamaru is clearly better at their little game. "We have several options Naruto-san."

Shikamaru and Shino spent the next 15 minutes explaining the pros and cons of the options they came up with to Naruto. Much like them, Naruto

didn't see much chance for success with some of them. Not that he'd let that stop him. His entire life wasn't given much chance for success either and he turned out just fine. Or so he thought at least. "I like the one where they both come here the best." Haku and to a lesser extent Zabuza had been some of Naruto's first friends. At least Naruto thought of them as friends. Certainly, he and Haku shared a bond of sorts. "We can always start with that one and then switch if it falls apart." The nice thing about their situation was that each option they explored didn't outright eliminate any other. "Where's Asuma-sensei? It's almost time to go."

"Why're you asking us? You're the one with the ridiculous sensing ability Ruto." Shikamaru still found it funny when Naruto forgot things. It wasn't nearly as bad as before, but Naruto could still be a scatterbrain at times.

"Oh yeah..." Naruto rubbed the back of his head, 'I really hate this habit,' before extending his senses outward. He had long since learned how to control the range and even turn it off. Feeling other people's negative emotions all day was not a pleasant experience. The pain and sorrow were particularly disturbing and unsettling. 'Especially Kakashi-sensei.' He found Asuma and Tazuna walking down the road. "They're almost here. Hey Shika, were you really serious?" Naruto's mind had been inordinately focused on that for too long.

Shikamaru smirked at the question. "Do you want me to be serious Ruto? How's Kurama by the way?"

"I uhh...maybe...yes...no? I don't know! I mean..." Naruto's face was flushed again. He had enough trying to stammer out a reply about that and would table the discussion for later. "He's fine. Bastard still insists I let him sleep more. I swear he must be part Nara or something. Whenever I try to talk to him he tells me to buzz off until something important happens." Kurama had been asleep for much longer than they first expected he would be and now continued to sleep for long periods of times. It did concern Naruto at how quiet the fox was being these days, but he chalked it up to just not being interested in what was going on right now.

Naruto was saved from more teasing with the arrival of Asuma. "I'm glad to see you all here early. Now before we depart since this is your first mission out of village I'm going to go through your equipment." Asuma wanted to make sure they had prepared themselves appropriately. Especially as his conversation with the client had revealed nothing new. The man was far more capable than initially believed. He spent the next 15 minutes going through each of their packs and was surprised to see them so well provisioned. "Don't you think you guys are overdoing it?" He sighed when they all shrugged. "You guys are too in sync with each other. In any event we're ready to go. So what's first Shikamaru?"

"We should adopt a loose diamond formation around the client as we travel. Naruto you're in the front. Shino and will I take the sides. You bring up the rear sensei." It was a standard formation specifically designed for escort missions. The vanguard position was usually the front-line fighter, the sides mid-range combat support, and the rear would be the last line of defense for the client and is typically the medic. In this case the rear guard was the person who would be able to save the rest of their collective asses. They could always tighten it up if need be as well. "It should take us at least a week to get to Nami."

They proceeded out the village and let Tazuna set the pace. There wasn't much talk as they traveled. The silence was suffocating for Tazuna. He was really hoping to talk and distract himself from the impending danger. Alas they were all silent as they kept a casual pace and kept glancing around the area. 'Shinobi are odd ducks.' Tazuna didn't expect any trouble until they got closer to the border, so he'd take advantage of the moment and relax a little bit.

The first day passed in silence until they stopped to make camp. They were in the middle of the forest. Not too hard to believe given Hi no Kuni is mostly forest. Tazuna had thought they might try and find some place secluded to camp instead they found the nearest clearing and made camp there. When he asked why they didn't want to find a more secure location, like a cave, he was told that it would be too obvious and dangerous. It limited the number of points of ingress, but in the event they had to flee they had no other way out except through the enemy. The clearing while less secure was better suited for combat. The night watch would also be able to see anybody approaching sooner and in this situation that was preferable to a possible confrontation where he might die.

Tazuna begrudgingly admitted that the kids knew what they were doing. 'The lazy spikey haired one seems to be in charge and not the older man.' This was concerning for Tazuna. He could acknowledge that the brats were better fighters than him, but they were still young. From what he knew of shinobi, genin were new recruits. The fact that one appeared to be in charge was not comforting. Still he had also been told that the man's job as their sensei was primarily to teach. This mission would serve as their classroom. So, the brat was in charge. It made Tazuna feel worse. 'I get what I pay for I guess.'

"Alright kids listen good. I want you all to experience what night watch is like. We'll rotate in two-hour shifts. Naruto you're up first, then Shikamaru, Shino, and I'll handle the last watch." Asuma barked out his order as the group began to set up camp. "Naruto you start on a meal. Something simple and filling. Go out and forage or hunt if you want. Never assume that you'll always have provisions available for resupply. If you can save what food you bring the better off you'll be in the long run."

Tazuna watched the blonde kid nod and set down most of his supplies before pulling out a bow and a quiver of arrows. "Bow and arrow. Little old fashioned don't you think?" He assumed a shinobi would use some kind of magic to catch an animal not hunt like a normal person would.

Naruto shrugged in response. "I prefer the simpler ways. We don't have time for me to make and set any game traps, so the bow and arrow will have to do. I also don't want to use any of my other equipment for this." They may be expecting to battle Zabuza but there was no guarantee Gatō wouldn't bring in more outside help. The bow wouldn't be used in combat, but it was preferable for hunting than using kunai or other blades. He brought his hands up in the tiger seal. "**Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Shadow Clone Technique)**." Two clones popped into existence next to him. "You two forage. Nuts, berries, and the like." The two clones nodded and disappeared. "I'll be back in a jiffy with some meat."

"My insects require a carcass as well Naruto-san, if it's not too much trouble. A small boar or fawn would suffice." It was nearing the time his insects would be needed again. While they mostly subsisted off his chakra it helped to supply them with other sources of nutrients. The kikaichū and rinkaichū were omnivores when found in the wild. It was why stumbling upon their nests typically ended in disaster for the poor soul who did the stumbling. It was also the reason the Aburame had been welcomed into Konoha. Their ability to control the insects was highly sought after. It saved the farmers and their crops in the long run.

Naruto nodded. "No problem. Any other requests?" Not getting any answers Naruto disappeared.

Asuma watched Naruto throughout the entire exchange. 'I knew this would be a good way to learn more about these three.' Naruto knew the **Kage Bunshin**. He figured he might after he had stolen the Forbidden Scroll not too long ago. Still Naruto had only had the scroll for an hour tops and to learn the technique that quickly was impressive. "I didn't realize your clan's insects ate anything besides chakra."

"It's not something we share often. We have enough problems fitting in without people thinking our insects might devour them. We typically feed them in private so as to avoid upsetting the populace." Shino honestly didn't understand people's fear of their insects. The wild was wrought with dangers. Their insects were merely one predator that had been domesticated, slightly. Nobody batted an eye at the Inuzuka's dogs, which were very wolf-like in behavior and appearance. Yet their insects were feared. "We only give them meat once a week but provide vegetation twice weekly. There is no need to be concerned. I am appropriately supplied to avoid any unpleasantness."

New revelations and appreciation for the Aburame aside, Asuma was still looking forward to learning more. He couldn't be sure if they were actually trying to hide things or if they just didn't care if he saw. Asuma was not looking forward to sharing a tent with Tazuna. He initially dismissed his father's concerns as being nothing more than that of an old man looking out for people he cares about. That dismissal was reevaluated after his own conversation with the man. Tazuna hadn't been able to tell him anything more than he told the Hokage. From what he knew the man's bridge was close enough to their village that most bandits wouldn't even think of attacking if it wasn't in force. Since they were an island that'd be too hard for most to even bother trying. Pirates maybe, but they'd hardly waste time with a bridge. In this case it was better to keep a close eye on Tazuna.

They'd only be here the night so there was no need to make an elaborate camp complete with traps and other hidden fortifications. Just a few tents and a fire pit. Almost like it was a survival exercise. Asuma liked being beyond the walls of the village. The walls felt constricting. It was part of why he left to be a Guardian Shinobi. The freedom it afforded him to experience the outside world was very appealing. Even on the harshest and toughest missions a simple camp site would relax him tremendously.

Camp was established quickly and that left them nothing to do until Naruto returned with his prey. Assuming he found an animal to hunt. Feeling and seeing that Tazuna was still uncomfortable and nervous Asuma set out to try and find out more. "So Tazuna, tell me more about your country." Nami had never been a place he needed to go. In fact, he couldn't say for certain anybody he knew had ever been sent to Nami. It's status as a tiny nation likely allowed it to operate under the radar for the most part. It's only real claim to fame was as a natural harbor.

"Wave is a beautiful country. Rivers crisscross the island and mangroves dot the landscape. I can't tell you the number of times I've simply sat on my dock and watched the sun set over the trees and water. It's the most picturesque sight I've ever seen." He took out a fresh bottle of liquor since his last one ran dry and took a huge swig. 'At least it was until Gatō showed up.' He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and tried not to grimace at the burning sensation in his throat. "We may not have much but for the most part we're a friendly bunch. Just enjoying our time fishing and taking care of our families and one another. Don't have much reason to venture beyond our shores very often."

"Yet you made the journey all the way to Konoha to hire us." For Asuma the biggest and most glaring question that was still unanswered was why Tazuna would travel so far instead of appealing to his nation's Daimyō for support. Asuma knew not all feudal lords actually cared for their subjects, but that was still usually the first avenue to be explored.

Tazuna nodded solemnly. He hated lying and omitting truths, but he couldn't afford to be abandoned at this time. His country and family were depending on him and he was depending on the shinobi he had hired. "Yes. Our nation is small and poor; and our Daimyō has very little money and couldn't spare any of his samurai to help us protect our investment. Since it's my bridge being threatened it fell upon me to ensure its survival." That and nobody had seen head or tail of the Daimyō since Gatō arrived. Most believe he was dead. Tazuna didn't know what to believe. What he knew was that they were on their own. "Honestly, even hiring you cost us nearly everything we had." Most of their money was tied up in the bridge. Their last chance at a better life. Their last chance at freedom. So, if he had to lie to make sure they came to his aid then so be it.

That told Asuma more than Tazuna thought or intended to give him. By all accounts Nami was small but was seldom ever considered poor. The diversity of its mangrove forests and wildlife, its location and neutrality, and its diverse fish population almost ensured that the nation would do well for itself. 'Something must be effecting the country's stability.' An absentee or uncaring Daimyō was often the reason for a downward spiral. Either exploiting their people too much or simply not caring about their plight. It may have been a pessimistic outlook to hold, but Asuma had learned from experience that nobles were often the reason people suffered. "Well you can rest easy. They may be young but they're more capable than they seem."

Tazuna could do nothing but hope that the man wasn't just trying to hype them up. He wouldn't rest easy until he was back at home. His home may have become the belly of the beast, but it still made him feel safe when he was with his family. "That's good to hear." He took another long swig from the bottle. He hadn't had this before and couldn't even remember what the merchant he bought it from said it was. But he was growing accustomed to the harsh bite it held. Tazuna continued to drink while the other two shinobi came and talked about this and that around the fire.

The blonde haired one came back two hours later carrying a board and with three rabbits hanging from his belt. Tazuna figured it was a piglet given its size. "Here's your boar Shino. Rabbits for the rest of us, and I found some hazelnuts and huckleberries." Naruto handed the boar to Shino who nodded and moved to the outer edge of their campsite to begin skinning the rabbits with ease. Tazuna watched the one called Shino take the boar and walk back into the forest. Tazuna didn't know much about Shino other than that he apparently traveled with insects though he had never seen them. Tazuna may not have been able to see him but he could definitely hear the sounds of a large swarm of insects buzzing. He didn't even want to imagine what was happening to the pig.

Tazuna watched as Naruto worked on the first rabbit. He wasn't much of a hunter, but he had been out a few times and knew that if one wasn't careful they could ruin the meat and hide. Naruto it seems had a lot of experience. With practiced ease Naruto had the rabbit's fur off and was in the process of cutting off its feet and getting rid of any fur that still remained. His cuts were clean and precise and there wasn't a single wasted movement. Naruto was in the process of slicing open the rabbit's belly to remove the innards. "You're quite good at that."

Naruto wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "I do a lot of hunting at home. Don't feel like giving my money to some people. Especially if I can do something myself." It was the best way to get back at people for the way they treated him. He'd be just fine without their goods and the loss of a customer would hurt them more. Doubly so since most of the Nara joined him in his silent boycott. Since the Nara stopped going that meant the Akimichi and Yamanaka stopped as well. Naruto didn't ask or do anything to get people to do it either, despite what the effected parties claimed. Some people just didn't know when to quit.

A lot of people still hated and feared him, but they stopped trying to interfere in his life now that it was well known he stayed and was close with the head of the Nara clan. That didn't stop some people from trying to inconvenience him or his new family. Rather than complain they simply took their business elsewhere. The best revenge was often not to seek revenge at all. Just find a way to turn the situation to your advantage.

Tazuna wasn't going to ask why he didn't feel like going to certain merchants. It wasn't hit business. He didn't say anything else as he watched Naruto finish skinning the last of the rabbits. The lazy one had opened a scroll and pulled out a pot and a small number of vegetables. 'Crazy magic.' To Tazuna's eyes it seemed the lazy one would be making their meal for the night. Roasted hazelnuts, rabbit stew, and some berries. Compared to the hardtack and cheese he had on the road before it was a feast.

"Want any help Shika?" Naruto was better at sitting still but he preferred to do something other than sit around and watch others work. He couldn't even set up his own tent since Shikamaru and he would be sharing. Most of the time the genin all shared a tent, and he remembered he, Sasuke, and Sakura all sharing one while Kakashi took his own. Shino preferred his own space, so he brought his own tent. Most squad leaders didn't care so long as whoever wanted their own tent wasn't going to be slowed down by the extra weight.

Shikamaru shook his head. "No, I've got this. Besides I need the practice. Ever since you moved in kaa-san hasn't been forcing me to help her as much anymore. Troublesome." His mother used to hound him all the time to help cook when she wasn't making his father do it. Shikamaru figured she just wanted somebody else capable of cooking for her. 'Troublesome woman.'

Naruto couldn't tell which perspective Shikamaru was finding troublesome. "You could still offer to help. You and I both know she'd love it if you did. She's always going to be your mother."

"Our mother. I would but I don't want to get in the way of your time with her. I've always had an awesome mother, but you haven't. Wouldn't be right to intrude on that special time. Don't try and deny it I know how much you enjoy spending time with her." Shikamaru was happy to give Naruto as normal a family as he could. He used to take his family for granted until the war and everything had started to spiral out of control. Then his father died and Shikamaru's world nearly shattered with it. 'You truly don't appreciate what you have until it goes.'

Naruto shook his head. "For a genius you're pretty dumb you know that, right? As if Yoshino-san or I would care if you were there too." He was smiling knowing that Shikamaru would always watch out for him and try to give him what he never had before. "If anything, it'd be more fun! Stop being an idiot, that's my shtick."

"Maa, shut up and let me cook. Troublesome blonde." He dumped the rabbit in the pot to get the meat cooking before preparing the vegetables he'd be tossing in with the rabbit.

Tazuna watched the blonde puff his cheeks and pout at the end of the exchange before walking back into the woods presumably to dispose of the innards. He and Asuma were a bit apart from the others. "They argue like an old married couple." This was something he could relate to, and the first time he felt shinobi might be normal people with extraordinary skills. Even if the thought of them as a couple was odd mechanically and practically. "Are they even allowed to be in that kind of relationship?"

Asuma finally gave in to the urge to have another cigarette and lit one. "Yeah. Nobody's really sure on their relationship status. Other than that they live in the same house with Shikamaru's parents." It was one of many mysteries surrounding the duo. Everybody had their own theory on a lot of things. So far nobody had directly confronted them about any of their thoughts. "Don't know how it is in other villages much but in ours we try not to dictate how a shinobi chooses to lead their personal life. It would make recruitment and retention difficult if it was too constricting." For the most part Konoha chose to let its shinobi do their own thing so long as readiness and ability didn't suffer.

"You shinobi are strange people." Tazuna was a third of the way through his new bottle already. Nothing more was said between them as they sat waiting for the food to finish cooking. Dinner would be a quiet affair as well. Once he had eaten his food Tazuna decided to call it a day and get some sleep. 'Another day done. Another step closer to home.'

Morning came faster than Tazuna would have liked. As usual his head was pounding and the light seeping in through the canvas was blinding. He groaned and gripped his head when a voice assaulted his ears. "Good morning. Breakfast will be ready soon. We want to get moving as quickly as possible so make yourself ready." Asuma didn't have any sympathy for the man and pulled his head back out of the tent.

Tazuna eventually hauled himself out of the tent to see their camp mostly disassembled and the faint trace of smoke from a fire that was recently extinguished. "Here." One of the genin forced a mess kit into his hands with some kind of food in it. He wasn't in a position or mood to do much arguing, so he just sat down and ate it. Tazuna recognized military rations when he saw them. It tasted horrible and was nothing compared to the meal last night. 'I bet the jōnin wanted them to experience field rations as well, bastard.' While he was eating Naruto was dismantling his tent as quickly as possible. The rest were busy doing what they could to erase any sign that they had ever been there. Once he was done eating one of them appeared and took the mess kit from him. He wasn't awake or alert enough to tell which one it was.

Tazuna stood by uselessly at the edge of the clearing as they finished clearing up their campsite. After a good ten minutes the clearing looked just as it did before they arrived. What surprised Tazuna the most was that they didn't use any tricks to cover their tracks having been told a skilled enough person would be able to tell if they had used any shinobi techniques to cover their tracks. Better to do no better than the average person could when cleaning up a campsite with a few minor improvements here and there. It was another eye-opening experience for Tazuna.

"If we're ready to go we'll use the same formation as yesterday." Naruto's recollection of events was hazy at best, so they didn't know when exactly they could expect a visit from the Oni Kyōdai (Demon Brothers). Only that it would happen before they reached wave. 'Essentially Naruto said sometime between now and the future. Really helpful.' The group formed up and set back out on their journey to Nami.

The next few days proceeded without incident and anybody they met along the road passed them by without comment or interest. They were nearing the end of their journey and less than a day from the borders of Hi no Kuni. With no sign of any dangerous persons the group was growing increasingly anxious, even Asuma. The client had hired them to protect them from attack and yet they had encountered none, and this far into the less populated areas made the lack of contact unsettling.

They were walking down the path and were nearing the last river they'd have to cross before they hit the border. It was here that the long-awaited conflict would begin. Naruto sensed the disturbance long before he saw it. Two malicious signatures along the path ahead. As they drew closer Naruto recognized the genjutsu that the Oni Kyōdai used to conceal themselves. 'Was I really so bad as to not notice how obvious it was?' Naruto was frowning at the sight of a puddle. A puddle when it hadn't rained in weeks. Being in the front Naruto couldn't signal his team that there was a problem without drawing attention. In the end he didn't need to. His teammates were equally aware of their presence.

Much like before the group casually walked past the puddle as if nothing was wrong. As Asuma passed by the genjutsu shifted and a long chain appeared to capture the man before a spray of blood flew through the air. "That's one." Two people were now charging the genin and Tazuna from the direction of the puddle.

Shino took up a defensive position directly in front of Tazuna and began to release his insects to swarm the charging attackers. Shikamaru jumped a bit closer to the attackers and put himself between them and Shino. His shadow started to stretch toward the attacking duo. This was how they preferred to fight when together. Naruto despite being a potential ninjutsu powerhouse was far better at physical combat than Shikamaru or Shino. The latter two also needed space to utilize their jutsu more effectively.

Naruto jumped backwards and began to counter their charge with one of his own after creating three clones to join him. Naruto let loose a series of shuriken at them and caught the chain that linked the Oni Kyōdai together and momentarily unbalanced them as the chain pulled backwards. They severed their connection and started engaging in a fierce taijutsu battle with Naruto and his clones. Their gauntlets gave them a slight advantage in the melee and Naruto could smell the poison on the blades. 'Only have to distract them a bit longer.'

So focused they were on Naruto that Gōzu and Meizu weren't paying attention to Shikamaru and Shino. They suddenly found themselves unable to move "**Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Possession Technique)** success." Shikamaru made another seal and his shadow responded by piercing their arms and legs effectively disabling them. "**Kage Nui no Jutsu (Shadow Stitching Technique)**." The two brothers cried in pain as they felt their arms and legs be stabbed repeatedly.

Not far behind Shikamaru's shadow came a buzzing sound that was rapidly getting louder. Naruto moved back now that Shikamaru was restraining them and watched as Shino's kikaichū swarmed and began to drain them of their chakra. There was no such thing as overkill in their world. Given that he remembers Zabuza charging an army of bandits with no arms and a single kunai in his mouth he wouldn't past any of his associates to do the impossible.

The whole thing was over before Tazuna could do anything more than look shocked at the supposed elite shinobi's death. Until the dead man appeared behind him. "Good work you three." Asuma's voice was calm and unwavering, and his reappearance gave Tazuna another heart attack at the sudden surprise. "Restrain them once your insects are done Shino." The bug user nodded and continued to observe the swarm. "As for you Tazuna," the man found himself feeling fear at the sight of Asuma's face which screamed anger, "anything else you want to tell us about this mission? You hired us to deal with bandits and the like. You said nothing about shinobi being after you. This encounter has pushed the scope of this mission beyond our obligation. I'm well within my right to take my genin and leave you here."

Seeing no other option left to him Tazuna decided to come clean. "Fine, I'll tell you. No, its more that I want you to know. There's a powerful man after my life because of the bridge I'm building. As for shinobi being here, to the best of my knowledge he didn't have any shinobi in his employ or I'd have been dead long before now."

Asuma was still waiting for more. Known or not the presence of shinobi changed things. "Who wants you dead?"

"You've heard his name at the very least, Gatō." Tazuna saw the look of recognition pass Asuma's face. Gatō was head of a well-known shipping conglomerate. "On the surface Gatō is a legitimate businessman. However, beneath the carefully crafted veneer the man is one of the most ruthless crime bosses around. Selling drugs, weapons, and people all under the cover and protection of his actual business. He first came to Nami years ago and we prospered for a time. Gatō was bringing money and investing into our nation and economy and then it slowly began to shift. He'd buy out whole businesses and if you refused you or your family disappeared and Gatō took possession. It wasn't long before he had control of all the ports and gave him de facto control over our shipping industry."

Asuma sighed and lit another cigarette. "That's why you came to Konoha. If you had been honest with us we would have helped you." Konoha and Hi no Kuni wouldn't stand for a criminal enterprise to be set up so close to their borders. At least not one they didn't have a finger or toe in.

Tazuna had considered that but he couldn't take the risk. "I just couldn't take the risk you'd say no. I wasn't kidding when I said hiring you cost us almost everything we had left. The 'we' in this case is the people of Nami not just me or my family. Everything we have is tied up in the bridge and that is why Gatō fears it and wants me dead." For island nations if you controlled the shipping and ports you controlled the economy. They had been too blind and naïve when Gatō first arrived and now they were paying for it.

Asuma sighed again. "Unfortunately, the scope of the mission has changed." He pointed at the now restrained Oni Kyōdai. "These two are former chūnin from Kirigakure, and they failed. That means the next opponent we come up against will be a jōnin or better." There were too many unknowns and variables to justify continuing the mission. If a band of chūnin failed Asuma would send a squad of jōnin and a man like Gatō had deep enough pockets to get an army of jōnin at the drop of a hat. "I really don't see much choice other than to cancel the mission and return to the Village."

Tazuna slumped in defeat. "Then you've killed me and my family."

"We can't turn back sensei. If we abandoned every mission just because it got more dangerous then we'd go out of business faster than a desert runs out of water! Besides you know the three of us aren't normal genin. We can support you well enough to handle anything else to come." Asuma wasn't Kakashi but the man was still an elite jōnin and Naruto would always believe in others. 'Not to mention we have plans to deal with Zabuza.' They also had to consider that Zabuza would be the first real challenge they'd face in this time and it was a good way to see if they were progressing well enough or if they needed to throw caution to the wind. The war would start in four years, but the initial moves would be made in the next three, so ideally they had to preempt some of the Akatsuki's moves within two years if not sooner.

Shikamaru closed a little black book that Asuma recognized as a bingo book. "Besides, the only known associate these two have is Momochi Zabuza. There's no way a man like the Kirigakure no Kijin (Demon of the Mist) is going to work with others, or cry for help when things get difficult." With the exception of Haku there shouldn't be anybody else popping up to disrupt the mission. "And I doubt very highly the man has made any friends in his time away from Kiri."

Shino adjusted his glasses and silently ordered his insects to expel the excess chakra they had consumed. His own reserves still full he didn't want them to be gorged should the unexpected happen. "Nevertheless, we should send a message to Konoha explaining the situation and requesting reinforcements. There is also the matter of Gōzu and Meizu to deal with." They couldn't afford to be taking prisoners along with them. The best option was to alert Konoha and hope they got picked up by a patrol before they could escape.

Asuma was on his third cigarette of the conversation, now regretting buying a cheaper brand that burned too quickly for his liking. "I guess I won't be able to convince the three of you to listen to my orders should I decide to turn back?" They all shook their heads. "Then the best course of action is to proceed. I don't want to deal with an angry Yoshino or an angry Shibi because I let their sons die." That and he didn't want to explain why he returned without three promising genin. He turned back to Tazuna. "We will, however, be reevaluating the terms of our contract at the conclusion of our work here." There were rules in place to ensure the Village and shinobi didn't get screwed over by the client.

Tazuna nodded his head and was close to tears having expected them to abandon him here. "I...I thank you all."

"Don't thank me, thank them." Asuma pointed over his shoulder at the genin who were presently patching up the wounds they had inflicted and ensuring they'd be unable to escape until they were picked up by a patrol or ANBU. "Hurry up over there we have to pick up the pace!" It'd be a few days before word reached Zabuza or Gatō that Tazuna was still alive. He'd like to cover as much ground as possible. They made pretty good time

for the rest of the day with everybody moving as quickly they could. It was night now but with Zabuza potentially lurking in the dark there was no fire and another round of exquisite rations.

By midday the following day they were nearing the coast and were no relying on Tazuna's contact to meet them and help cross the water. There was a heavy fog over the water that Naruto remembered was one of Nami's natural barriers. Naruto heard the sound of a boat motor first. "He's here." Soon enough a boat emerged from the fog with a single person in it.

Tazuna raised his hand in greeting. "Thanks for helping out."

The man in question didn't look very happy to be here. He was downright terrified. "Don't mention it. Hurry up. There's no telling how long the fog will last, and I don't want to get caught." Unknown to Tazuna and the others since Tazuna's departure Gatō had placed the island under blockade to prevent anybody else leaving and passed it off as an unfortunate disease that was currently spreading through the land. Essentially a quarantine, and nobody was willing to investigate to see if it was true. The ships Gatō had hired to ward off any prying eyes were doing their job well.

The group was silent as the driver started the engine and took them into open water and into the fog. As they got deeper and deeper in the fog a looming shadow entered their field of view. It was here that the engine was cut, and he started steering by hand. The momentum from the engine would carry them far enough without need to restart the engine until it was safe again. Naruto remembered this being Tazuna's bridge, and it truly was an auspicious undertaking. The bridge was already huge, far larger than it likely needed to be. 'Tazuna is a Super Bridge Builder though...' remembering the man's own description of himself.

They eventually reached a tunnel that lead under another bridge connecting the main island with one of the smaller islands. Beyond this construction was the bay that contained the bulk of Nami's harbors, docks, piers, and other waterways. The driver restarted the engine and took them to a small fishing dock. "This is as far as I go. Good luck."

"Thank you." Once they were all off the boat the man took off again. "We're not far from my house now." Tazuna started walking in the direction of home.

For Asuma the knowledge that they were nearing the man's home meant their confrontation with Zabuza was imminent. "I want you three to focus on protecting the client." Asuma wasn't sure he could take Zabuza in a one on one, but he knew those three would not last very long against the man. The pace was slower now. Rushing through the fog would not help them at all. Better to take it slow and safe than stumble into a trap. The fog had lifted when they entered the bay but here on land it seemed to have returned. Naruto knew this wasn't a natural fog as much as it was Zabuza's **Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Technique)**. Visibility was dropping quickly but wasn't completely gone.

Naruto sensed a large chakra hiding in the bushes that he assumed was Zabuza. He instinctively threw a kunai in the bushes and another once he felt the chakra signature rapidly relocate. His actions put the rest of the group on edge knowing that Naruto was arguably the best sensor in Konoha. The signature was now directly behind them. Naruto was focused on tracking Zabuza than remembering what happened in the fight last time. So, when Asuma shouted "DOWN!" He wasn't as quick to react, and Shino had to drag him to the ground while Shikamaru tackled Tazuna.

A massive zanbatō came flying through the air and would have cleaved Tazuna in half and taken most of their heads off had they not gotten out of the way in time. The sword dug deep into a tree and Zabuza appeared standing on the sword's handle. "Leaf shinobi. Been a long time since I've encountered any tree huggers. Nothing personal but I really need you to hand over the bridge builder."

The Konoha group quickly got back to their feet. "Manji formation!" Asuma barked out the order and the genin took up a triangle formation around Tazuna. "Momochi Zabuza. The Kirigakure no Kijin. Why is man like you working for trash like Gatō?"

"Business is business. He pays me for a job and that's all there is to it." Zabuza crouched down and grabbed the handle with one hand. "Now, are you going to hand over the old man or are you going to die?"

Asuma pulled out his trench knives and started channeling his chakra through them. "What do you think?" Truthfully Asuma didn't want to fight Zabuza. The man's sword would be difficult to counter with just his trench knives. Though confident his knives were now sharper than the man's blade, the blade was still massive and the way Zabuza appeared ready to wield it with one hand spoke of his strength.

Zabuza chuckled. "I was hoping you'd pick fight." When Gōzu and Meizu failed to report back to him Zabuza grew curious. The two weren't much individually, but together they were a pretty decent team. A squad of genin and a single jōnin shouldn't have been able to stop them without injury. Yet to Zabuza's eyes none of them seemed wounded in the least. The prospect of a good fight got his blood pumping. "Let's begin, shall we?" Zabuza answered his own question by effortlessly pulling Kubikiribōchō from the tree and somersaulting through the air with a strong downward slash that would cleave Asuma in two.

A loud clanging noise echoed through the area as Asuma brought his trench knives up to intercept the blade. He grit his teeth at the sheer power Zabuza was putting through the blade. 'What monstrous strength and all that was with one hand!' If Zabuza ever put all his power behind the blade Asuma might actually die here.

Zabuza laughed again. "Impressive you could stop me with those tiny blades of yours. But now the dance really begins!" He lashed out with a quick kick to Asuma's chest and pushed himself away before charging back in and swinging the massive zanbatō in a way that belied its massive weight. So far Zabuza had Asuma on the defensive but Asuma's smaller blades gave him a slight advantage the closer the two got to each other. As evidenced when Zabuza felt his cheek get cut despite the blade not making contact. He jumped back again and used his free hand to wipe the blood from his cheek. "A wind user. Very interesting indeed."

Asuma was starting to breath heavily from constantly having to block the massive sword. 'Great...he knows more about me and hardly seems bothered by what we just did.' If he kept this a strictly weapon based battle he'd lose. Deciding to change the nature of the game Asuma used the **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** to appear upwind of Zabuza. Once there he gathered chakra in his mouth and started exhaling a cloud of gunpowder toward the man. Thanks to the current breeze the cloud was moving toward Zabuza faster than normal. As soon as Asuma lost sight of the other man he used the flint hidden in his mouth to ignite the cloud. "**Katon: Haisekishō (Fire Style: Burning Ash)!**"

Not recognizing the cloud as gunpowder at first Zabuza didn't move. His opponent reducing visibility would only help him win. Zabuza rarely relied on his sight in a serious fight. It wasn't long however until he recognized the telltale smell of gunpowder and cursed himself for not getting out of the way sooner. Figuring what came next would be an explosion Zabuza shielded himself with Kubikiribōchō as he moved to stand atop the nearby

water. The explosion was intense, and he was still singed by it.

"I guess our dance is over. A pity I enjoyed our tussle, but since you want to move on to ninjutsu allow me to indulge you!" Zabuza was glad he had taken the time to infuse his chakra into much of the water beforehand. He ran through the hand seals as quick as he could lest his opponent charge him and try to disrupt him. "**Suiton: Daibakufu no Jutsu (Water Style: Giant Vortex Technique)**!" The water around him began to surge and spin wildly as it rose out of the lake and shot toward Asuma.

Asuma looked at the massive tidal wave with trepidation. 'It had to be a shinobi from Mizu no Kuni...Why couldn't it have been a Suna shinobi.' Asuma cursed having wind and fire natures now more than ever. Dodging wasn't possible. The attack was simply too large and as soon as it impacted anything near him it would explode outward. He was about to move just to avoid the worst of the technique when the earth shot up in front of him. "**Doton: Doryūheki (Earth Style: Earth Wall)**." He felt relief when he heard Shikamaru and Naruto yelling out the one thing that would save him. Zabuza's attack impacted the wall greatly diminishing its devastation but the area was still flooded from the water. His relief was short lived as two of his students appeared next to him. "I thought I told you three to guard Tazuna."

Naruto had a smirk on his face that annoyed Asuma. "You looked tired sensei, and if you go down we'd die soon after."

Shikamaru looked bored which also annoyed Asuma. "Besides we are guarding Tazuna." He pointed over at the man and saw Shino standing calmly in front of the client. However, what caught his attention was a purple barrier that surrounded them both. "Shino's insects aren't useful here. The water is too violent and packed with chakra." That and they wanted Shino to use his insects to find Haku and start draining his chakra just in case. As well as plant a female beetle on him.

"I'm not even going to ask what the hell you three are up to at this point. Thanks for the support." He wanted to see more of what they were capable of and this mission was promising to give him exactly what he wanted. "Naruto you and I will engage him while Shikamaru tries to trap him with his shadow, agreed?" He got two nods in response. "Good." Asuma took a brief moment to force more air into his lungs. 'Damn you Kakashi...you and your fucking curse.' He released his breath and charged back toward Zabuza with Naruto behind him.

"Tsk. Now you're sending brats to fight me?" Zabuza felt insulted at his fight being interrupted by two nuisances. Zabuza used his sword to block Asuma's trench knives and then shifted it slightly to block Naruto's kick. To his surprise he had to take a small step back. "You've got some weight behind you there gaki."

Naruto smiled at him as he landed back behind his sensei. "Thanks! I've been training really hard for years." Naruto went low as Asuma started using his trench knives as brass knuckles throwing wild haymakers to force Zabuza to dodge or block. Giving Naruto a chance to land blows on Zabuza's legs. "It's an honor to meet you by the way."

Zabuza grunted as he felt a foot connect with his knee. "Don't think anybody's ever said that to me." He used his sword being held back by Asuma's knives to propel himself over the man to lash out at Naruto's back with his feet. He saw a shadow was about to reach him. Not knowing exactly what the shadow would do Zabuza allowed himself to crash through the water's surface. He quickly replaced himself with a log that had been floating in the lake and reappeared on the surface a few meters from where he went under. "You three are starting to annoy me." Another slew of hand seals and six Zabuza's appeared in front of them. They split into two groups of three and moved to attack Naruto and Shikamaru. "Now we can continue our dance." The original Zabuza rushed Asuma with his sword again.

Shikamaru grunted when the first clone reached him and nailed him with the pommel of his sword as he backflipped out of the way of the blade. 'Whoever said water couldn't hurt you was an idiot.' He kept dodging out of the way of their attacks in the direction of the land as best he could. 'Naruto fought this when he sucked? Troublesome.' He took out a few kunai with exploding notes attached to them and threw them at the water right in front of the clones that blocked the explosions with their blades. 'Perfect.' He had managed to lead them toward the massive earth wall that was still there.

Shikamaru smirked as he now had a lot more shadow to utilize now. "**Kage Nui (Shadow Stitching)**." His only goal now as to attack them with his shadow and prevent them from getting close to him. Keeping track of three enemies was easy for him but hitting them with his shadow was proving difficult. 'Kiri really lost a great shinobi in Zabuza.' Fortunately for Shikamaru the wall's shadow augmented his strength much more than the division Zabuza's clones dealt with. Even minor damage to the water clone would be crippling and eventually Shikamaru's clones dissolved back into water. 'This is so troublesome.'

Naruto was having fun. His fight with the Zabuza clones was a lot more involved than Shikamaru's. The more he grappled with the clones the more he became convinced of one thing. 'I need to learn how to use a sword!' His kunai just weren't enough to block the cloned zanbatō. He had a new-found respect for Asuma who was managing to do just that against the real Zabuza. Naruto was getting riddled with small cuts that while not disabling were incredibly annoying. "Enough of this. **Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu (Water Clone Technique)**!" Twelve Naruto clones appeared and charged the three clones of Zabuza intent on making them stand still. "**Yōton: Shakugaryūgan no Jutsu (Lava Style: Scorching Rocks Technique)**!" Naruto indiscriminately shot balls of lava at the mass of clones not caring who got hit.

Zabuza had kept a watchful eye on the others as he continued to fight with Asuma. "Brats aren't terrible, they yours?"

Asuma was getting tired not that he cared to show it. "Partially, four of us work with em."

Zabuza hummed. "Unusual. Still can't argue with results. Doesn't look like things are going to go my way right now." Zabuza still had the advantage though. "Unfortunately for you and your brats I can't afford to lose here. **Suiton: Suiō no Jutsu (Water Style: Water Prison Technique)**." The water started to swirl beneath Asuma's feet and rose up to surround him in a sphere faster than he could move. "I'm afraid this is as far as you're going to go."

Asuma cursed to himself for fighting on top of the water for as long as he did. "Take Tazuna and run!" His only saving grace is that Zabuza would have to stay put while he was trapped in here allowing his genin a brief window to put distance between them.

Naruto had sprinted back toward the land before he stopped and turned around much to Asuma's horror. "No can-do sensei. Everything changed the moment you got captured." Asuma watched as Shikamaru moved right next to him. "You might want to duck sensei!" Asuma watched as Naruto and Shikamaru both started weaving hand seals. He recognized Shikamaru's jutsu as the one he had given him a week earlier and saw enough of Naruto's to know it was a wind technique. "**Fūton: Atsugai (Wind Style: Pressure Damage)**!"

Naruto's voice was loud as was Shikamaru's who yelled, "**Katon: Karyūdan (Fire Style: Dragon Flame Bomb)**," at the same time.

The massive tornado of wind from Naruto's mouth combined with the stream of fire from Shikamaru created a swirling blaze of death heading right for Asuma and Zabuza. Both jōnin were gaping at the attack before Zabuza had the good sense to drop his jutsu and dive as deep as he could beneath the water with Asuma not far behind him. Their thoughts were in sync as they reflected on what they just saw. 'Those damn brats almost killed me!'

They both resurfaced at the same time but separated from each and expressed their thoughts. "I could have died there!" To which Naruto shrugged.

Asuma and Zabuza were gearing up for round three before a series of senbon flew through the air and pieced Zabuza's neck. When Asuma turned to face the new attacker, he saw an ANBU mask similar to that of a Kiri Onin (Hunter). Asuma was shocked when the person spoke and sounded so young. "Indeed, he could have died. Now he really did die." The hunter lowered their weapons, disappeared, and appeared right above Zabuza's corpse. "I thank you for distracting him. Long have I hunted him and now my business can be put to rest." The hunter bowed in gratitude. "Thank you, Konoha shinobi." They knelt down and picked up Zabuza's corpse. "Now if you'll excuse me I must dispose of the body. Farewell." The hunter sank into the water and disappeared from the area.

Once he was certain the Kiri Hunter was out of the area Asuma breathed a sigh of relief and allowed himself to feel his exhaustion. "Thank Kami that's over." Internally he was frowning. He knew they got lucky. Members of the Shitai Shori Han (Corpse Processing Team) otherwise known as the Onin Butai (Hunter Corps) were not known for leaving witnesses if they found their prey mid battle. Still the way that hunter behaved seemed off to Asuma, but he was in no position to do anything about it. For the moment he'd take the respite they have and head to Tazuna's house. He needed rest first and foremost. "Alright team let's keep going. We're safe for the time being." He received two nods from Shikamaru and Naruto while he watched Shino remove something from the ground and the barrier shimmered away. "How much further to your house Tazuna?"

Tazuna was looking at all of them with a mix of awe, admiration, fear, and respect at what he just witnessed. "Not far. Maybe an hour-long walk."

Asuma nodded and motioned for him to lead the way. "Maintain a tight formation around Tazuna as we walk. Zabuza may be defeated but let's not forget Gatō is still out for his head." Asuma took up a position directly next to Tazuna. It would allow him to relax a little bit as he could trust in Naruto to alert him to any danger. 'Hopefully there won't be anymore fighting today.' His fight with Zabuza convinced him that he needed to train harder and diversify more. The Hokage and the Sannin had been working to motivate the jōnin to work harder and Asuma had jumped on board, 'Evidently not enough.' Swords weren't really his style, but he'd definitely be seeking out Hayate when they got back.

After a half hour at a brisk jog they finally arrived at Tazuna's house. Much to Asuma and Tazuna's relief. Tazuna walked up to the door and opened it. "Tsunami! I'm back." Tazuna waved the group of shinobi in and motioned for them to take a seat.

A woman came around the corner to see four strangers, three of them children, sitting in her living room. "Welcome home father." She glanced at the new arrivals. "Who are your new friends?"

"These are the shinobi from Konoha that I hired." For the first time in three weeks Tazuna felt like he could finally relax and take it easy. He was home, three of Gatō's assassins were dead, and his family was still alive and well. Things were looking up from his perspective.

"I see." The woman smiled at them all after hearing they weren't threats. "Thank you for getting my father home. Are you hungry?" She turned around and walked back into the kitchen at the sound of two stomachs growling. One her father's and one Naruto's. "Dinner will be ready in an hour. Clean yourselves up until then." The small group did exactly that and allowed themselves to relax knowing the next conflict wouldn't occur today.

On the opposite of the island another duo was also moving to recuperate. "Now to remove the needles." As the masked hunter was reaching for the needles still imbedded in Zabuza's neck, a hand lashed out and gripped the offending wrist in a vice.

"I can do it myself Haku." Zabuza release Haku's wrist and unceremoniously yanked the senbon from his neck. "Damn you're a cruel one Haku. Did you really have to strike my neck?" Zabuza looked at his companion and frowned at the mask. "And take that damn mask off!"

Haku laughed innocently and removed the mask from his face. "It helped with the deception. It has its uses just like it did before." Zabuza growled as Haku helped him to his feet. "You should really be more careful. The next time I might not be there to help you Zabuza-sama." The older man growled again. "Still those shinobi were impressive, weren't they?" Haku had been quietly observing the entire fight unnoticed as was their practice.

Zabuza allowed some of his ire to fade. For him it was acceptable to be temporarily defeated by a worthy foe. The jōnin had been suitable enough but with his brats was even more fun. "They were. I hope you watched them carefully Haku. You'll be fighting the brats next time around." Zabuza hadn't seen a Yōton user since his last encounter with Terumi Mei near a decade ago but it was hard to miss the giant balls of lava being thrown around. "The blonde brat is like you. Don't underestimate him."

"Of course not Zabuza-sama." He turned his head and smiled. "I am your tool to be used as you see fit." Nothing brought him greater happiness than to be of use to Zabuza. "It should be about a week until your body completely recovers but knowing you I'm sure you'll be up and about in a matter of days."

"Cheeky brat, aren't you? Take me back Haku." There was planning that needed to be done. Zabuza had recognized the sash indicative of a member of the Shugonin Jūnishi (Guardian Shinobi Twelve) so finding information about the jōnin wouldn't be too difficult. Though not as well known as his old unit all Guardians found themselves in the bingo book out of principle. The brats would be harder targets, but their encounter had taught them a great deal.

Zabuza knew a Nara when he saw one and the shadow techniques confirmed it. Zabuza assumed that the blonde had earth and fire affinities because of his Kekkai Genkai so while his water wouldn't be overly effective against it, should the blonde use any other techniques Zabuza would likely come out on top. The last one as the most unknown. Zabuza thought he overheard the blonde brat tell the jōnin that the boy's bugs would be useless which suggested an Aburame. Zabuza didn't encounter enough of them in his career to have much knowledge of their abilities. "While I'm recovering Haku I expect you to gather some information for me." Zabuza proceeded to explain exactly what he wanted Haku to look into, to which the boy agreed to do without hesitation. 'Next time I won't lose.'

Yay another chapter! Boy fights are hard to write. Kudos to all those other authors who do it so well! I spent a lot of time trying to make the Demon Brothers not seem sucky...but we just don't know anything about them sooooo I just got rid of em as fast as possible.

Hopefully you won't be kept waiting for the next chapter, which again will be in Wave. Going to keep these missions contained so as to not jump around too much.

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 11**

A/N: I probably should've said this earlier, but I was just so shocked that I couldn't believe it. Thanks to all of you who have been enjoying this story and sticking with it! At the time I'm writing this note it has like 500 followers and 350 favorites which is 850 more of both than I ever expected to get! I hope I can keep delivering. So to everybody out there who likes this story. Thanks! I hope you keep reading and that it doesn't suck as badly as I think it does at times. *Psst* I'm very self-critical if you can't tell!

Royiah. I'm glad you're enjoying the story despite not liking boyxboy but in all honesty I absolutely detest the Naru/Hina pairing. It makes no sense to me. We had very little interaction between the two aside from Hinata being the only Naruto fangirl in the series. Maybe I missed some of their moments for whatever reason, but to me the only reason I see them together is because Hinata is the only person to ever express love for Naruto in that way. Not really the crux of what you were saying but I just felt I needed to explain why I dislike the cannon pairing. As for why boyxboy. Shikamaru is adorable! How can I not pair him up with the lovable sunshine? Shika is whipped. That much is true regardless of who he's with. It's a Nara tradition to be whipped by your mate. Naruto is equally as whipped but Shikamaru is just too lazy to do anything. I honestly really like how I'm handling Sakura. I think a lot of people overlook just how much of an impact Naruto really had on her personality and life. Naruto was always there to prop Sakura up after Sasuke did his thing. Sure she may have loathed him but it always feels nice to be wanted by somebody. The fact that nobody ever chastised her for her treatment of Naruto also gave her an outlet for her frustration and anger which she spent a lot of time repressing leading to the development of Inner Sakura. She doesn't have that here anymore and doesn't know how to handle it all, so all she can do is lash out at the person she blames for it. Bet you can guess who that is. As for Hinata she was just as bad, in my opinion, as everybody else. She pushed everything onto Naruto. Naruto was responsible for her changes at least in her mind. That's an unfair burden to place on somebody. It is very sad that her family is a walking talking pile of shit but to burden Naruto with all your hope is unfair. I had to destroy that hope to make her better, and for anybody thinking I won't be 'fixing' things well you're wrong. I will be. At my pace. If that's too slow for you then I'm sorry, but there are millions of Naruto fanfics out there you can read if you don't like mine. I will also tell you Haku is not a girl although is still very effeminate.

Guest. I really wish it told me who you were. I have an idea but still ideas are equivalent to theories, that which is not yet proven. I'm glad you came back and are enjoying this story. The chapters and story are absolutely NOT perfect but I appreciate the compliment! Yeah wave is repetitive. If I'm being honest I wish I hadn't done it, but I have and I won't change it so here we are. Yes the Naruto plot armor is strong. It will be here too sadly. I can't kill my favorite character, besides what would Shikamaru do to me if I killed Naruto!? Shadows are scary... As for what will happen to Haku and Zabuza who knows? I do of course but do you? Can you really trust what I've written? Can you trust what I'm writing here? Maybe this statement is a double double bluff to make you think I'm lying about lying about what's going to happen. Or maybe this is just a confusing jumble of words meant to be slightly humorous but also at the same time make you question everything you think might happen. Could I possibly be bluffing about my double double bluff? What would that be anyway a triple bluff? A quadruple bluff? Who knows? All I can say is I think people will probably meet the ending of wave with mixed reactions.

Great news! I still don't own Naruto. The legacy is safe.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

Flashback no jutsu – Flashback

"When you see a 'word' like this, think air quotes or sarcasm!"

"If you see a *word* like this than it's for emphasis."

Chapter 10 – Wave Part 2

Zabuza had been resting for nearly a day when Gatō's short smug head darkened his doorway. "So even the great Kirigakure no Kijin (Demon of the Mist) comes back defeated." His voice was full of bravado and arrogance.

The way Gatō behaved and spoke rubbed Zabuza the wrong way. The man foolishly believed that having money gives him power and he walks around like he's untouchable. 'I can't wait to hang him from his toe nails and watch the blood drain from his neck like a pig.' The though had Zabuza smirking in delight. It was fortunate he kept his face wrapped.

Gatō seethed at this latest failure. "How hard is it to kill one old man!?" Gatō felt emboldened at the sight of Zabuza bandaged and confined to the bed and his two retainers at his side added more to that. "I'm starting to wonder if you're really worth the price 'Demon'."

Zabuza started growling at the perceived insult. "What do you want Gatō?"

Gatō tapped his cane on the ground twice. "I want what I'm paying you for, Tazuna's head!" The only reason Gatō was willing to pay Zabuza was because Tazuna had hired shinobi. He could easily hire an entire army of lowlifes and degenerates to do Zabuza's job, but he wanted guaranteed results. Gatō knew that a single shinobi, even an inexperienced one, was worth at least three times more than an ordinary person in skill than what he could buy. The more experienced shinobi can even be called gods from a laymen's perspective. Zabuza was supposed to be one of those godly, or in this case demonic, beings. So far Gatō was not satisfied or impressed. "You're costing me a fortune and so far you aren't delivering. And now I come and find you licking your wounds!"

Zabuza got a handle on his growling lest he piss the little worm off more. Not that he cared, but he hadn't yet been paid and he needed the money. "Patience Gatō. Tazuna will die and soon. The only reason I'm even like this is because of him, not the shinobi he's hired." Which wasn't a complete lie. "Now that I've seen what they can do killing them will be much easier. Before they were unknown. Now I know how they fight and they

think they know the limits of my ability." Zabuza started to cackle. "I can't wait for the slaughter!" His cackling turned into full blown laughter. Only he wasn't imagining the Konoha shinobi dead at his feet but Gatō and his goons. 'Soon. Very soon.'

Gatō would be lying if he said he wasn't disturbed by Zabuza's manic laughter, but in his line of work and especially in the criminal underworld one could never show weakness. "I expect results soon Zabuza." Gatō turned and walk out intent on making sure that Tazuna and his damnable bridge ceased to exist as soon as possible. 'That's twice he's failed to deliver me the bridge builder's head.' Gatō doesn't tolerate failure from his associates and definitely not from the hired help. 'Time for Plan B.' As a businessman Gatō was prepared for any eventuality. Tazuna would die and if Zabuza couldn't facilitate that than he'd bring in somebody who could.

As soon as Gatō was gone Zabuza let out a frustrated cry. "Kami I hate that worm!" Zabuza hated that he had been reduced to working for a pathetic waste of space like Gatō. Had the Yondaime Mizukage not go, what Zabuza described as, 'bat shit crazy' he'd still be a Kiri shinobi. He didn't mind taking orders so long as the person above him had the strength to back up their position. Gatō had none of that and therefore had none of Zabuza's respect.

Haku was the level headed one of the duo. "Its still too early to kill him Zabuza-sama." He didn't like Gatō any more than Zabuza, but he wasn't liable to kill the man at a moment's notice. Haku still didn't understand why Zabuza kept him around as he had yet to kill any of his master's targets in their travels. "Still I am reluctant to leave you alone with him in your present condition." Zabuza had told him what he wanted him to do, but that would mean leaving Zabuza vulnerable. Now without the Oni Kyodai (Demon Brothers) that was an unacceptable risk. Weak or not Gatō was able to move freely while Zabuza was not.

"You worry too much Haku. The little worm won't do anything." He took a brief pause before ending his thought. "Yet." Zabuza was not a fool, and he was not a man to suffer fools lightly. He knew that Gatō would eventually betray him. Either by selling him out to Kiri or letting word spread that he's here and wait for somebody to come after the price on his head. Even if Gatō didn't sell him out somebody would come. It was inevitable really. But Zabuza knew Gatō wouldn't make a move until he had what he wanted.

Ironically his own life now rested on the continued existence of the man he was supposed to kill. Haku was skilled and would kill to protect Zabuza of that he was certain, but Haku was not all powerful. 'With my body like this it would be a short fight.' Truthfully Zabuza hated the little plan he and Haku had used time and time again, but it was hard to argue with results. This little play of theirs had gotten numerous shinobi, samurai, and other mercenaries to drop their guard thinking he's truly dead. Lolling them into a false sense of security that would vanish as soon as he had recovered from the death-life state Haku put him in. One thing he did enjoy about it was seeing the fear in his opponents' eyes as they realized he was still alive. He relished it.

"I want you to find out everything you can about those Konoha shinobi Haku." Information was just as important, if not more important, than combat capacity. He had an idea what they were capable of and how they'd behave in the next encounter, but he was out for at least a week. An inconvenience yes, but also an opportunity. Zabuza loved to exploit those. "I know you plan on going out to find a way to help me recover faster. Observe the shinobi if you can."

"Of course Zabuza-sama." Haku gingerly rose from the seat he had set up beside Zabuza's bed. "I shall return later this evening. Do try and not aggravate anything, your body needs rest to recover." Haku left the room to head to his own to change in less telling clothing. They had the advantage that the Konoha shinobi didn't know who he was. So long as he didn't look or act like a shinobi they should be none the wiser.

While Zabuza and Haku were busy recuperating the Konoha team was getting ready for a riveting day of guarding Tazuna and his family for the man's first day back to work at the bridge. Asuma had assumed control of the mission from Shikamaru after the appearance of Zabuza, and Shikamaru was just fine with that. He hated leading. Not because he was bad at it but because he took every failure personally. So when Asuma started barking out orders Shikamaru sighed in relief.

"Shikamaru and Shino today you two will be guarding Tazuna's family. If Tsunami-san goes somewhere one of you goes with her while the other stays at the house." Asuma received two curt nods in understanding. "Naruto, you and I will go to the bridge with Tazuna." The blonde also nodded letting Asuma focus on Tazuna. "We'll leave as soon as your ready Tazuna."

"Alright." Tazuna was filled with both excitement and trepidation. He had been away from his project for weeks now. There was no telling what condition he'd find the bridge or his workers in. He had left a man he trusted to keep working in charge, but Tazuna knew that every person has a breaking point. He also knew that very few in Nami had much left to give. He gave his daughter a hug and kissed her forehead like he'd done since she was little. "Be safe today dear."

Tsunami returned the embrace as hard as she could. "I'm more worried about you than me."

Tazuna barked out a laugh. "It's my job to worry about you not the either way around." He stepped back toward the door after grabbing his bag with all his tools, plans, and lunch. "I'll be home in time for dinner." He was ready and eager to get going. "I'm ready to go now Shinobi-san."

Asuma motioned for Naruto to form up beside Tazuna. "Lead the way Tazuna." The walk to the bridge allowed Asuma to finish sorting through the thoughts that were plaguing him. Namely the Kiri Hunter-nin. The hunter's behavior had been gnawing away at him ever since their encounter. They should have started destroying Zabuza's body immediately after ensuring that he and his team were all dead. Instead they were still alive and Zabuza's body disappeared.

'There's also the senbon to consider.' Asuma knew quite well how deadly a well-placed senbon could be. Yet the hunter struck Zabuza's neck. Hardly a well targeted vital point, at least for a senbon. 'I suppose its possible the senbon were coated in deadly poison and the jugular as well as gravity would help push the poison into Zabuza's heart faster.' Still Asuma hadn't been able to get close enough to Zabuza to check for signs of life. He wasn't quite sure which scenario to believe. Prudence demanded he assume the worst which meant Zabuza was alive.

Asuma caught himself before he sighed out loud. He wasn't looking forward to another confrontation with Zabuza. He had barely survived the first and probably wouldn't have if not for his team. Zabuza was a very dangerous opponent. 'Guess Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama were right.' Their words that the village's strength had declined were starting to ring true. Zabuza may have belonged to an elite unit from the Mist but Asuma had belonged to Hi no Kuni's equivalent. He should have been better. 'Guess its time I join Kakashi and Gai in their ridiculous challenges.'

"We're here." Tazuna's statement roused Asuma from his thoughts. He had to admit that Tazuna's bridge was ambitious. It was far wider than it had any right to be. 'The man did say that he was a *super* bridge builder.'

"I'm glad to see work is still going." Tazuna's biggest fear had been that he'd arrive back to the bridge being destroyed or all his workers gone. Though he did notice the number of workers had gone down again. 'I shouldn't be surprised.' Still there were still some and that was all that mattered. There was only one thing left for Tazuna to do, get to work. "KAITO!" Tazuna had hoped his voice would carry over the sound of men at work for his foreman to show up.

Eventually a short man with a bald head walked over to the group. "Boss! It's good to have you back."

Tazuna nodded. "Tell me how things are going."

Kaito started walking along the parts of the bridge that had been built. "Well I'm sure its easy to tell that we've made progress since you were gone, but what may be harder to tell is that we're nearing the halfway point. A few more days and we're over that hurdle." He led them to the edge of the bridge. "If you look hard enough you can just make out the land through the fog." It was far too foggy at the moment to do that. "On a good day at least." As they started walking back Kaito gestured at the works around him. "Unfortunately, as I'm sure you noticed we've lost more workers. Some to fear of Gatō and his cronies. Others to work related injuries. If we keep losing workers at this rate then we'll never be able to finish."

Tazuna agreed. "We can only hope people keep working or come back." There was nothing else that they could do. As if on queue one of the workers was approaching Tazuna. Having a feeling of what this was going to be about Tazuna couldn't help but sign audibly. "What do you want Touma?" Tazuna made it a point to know everybody's name who worked on this bridge with him. It wasn't much but he felt like it was an important thing to do.

The man in question looked tired and weary like the rest of the people of Nami. "I'm sorry Tazuna, truly I am, but this'll be the last day I work here. I can't keep risking my family's safety for you." One of Gatō's men had approached his wife and son with a warning. "Maybe it's time you finally consider stopping too. Face it Tazuna we can't win here. Even if we finish the bridge Gatō will just kill us and destroy it anyway."

Tazuna was so used to situations like this that he didn't bother trying to fight it anymore. "Finish the morning's work and then at lunch you can go home." Tazuna turned his back on the man. "As for me. I won't give up. I *can't*. This bridge is our last chance to make things better for ourselves and our families. I won't abandon it, even if that means I have to die." He started walking away from Touma with the group following him. "Give my best to your family Touma." Tazuna wouldn't and couldn't allow himself to give up hope. There was too much riding on this bridge for them to abandon all hope now.

Once Tazuna and Kaito finished their report on the schedule and status of the bridge Naruto finally opened his mouth. "Ne, Oji-san?"

Tazuna looked at Naruto as he tried to figure out how to keep anymore workers from walking off. He didn't have anything to give them. They already weren't getting paid. What little resources they had left all got poured into securing raw materials. He used to bribe them with extra food but that too was running out. "What do you want?" His voice had more bite than he intended but it was understandable given the circumstances.

"Does what happened with that Touma person happen often?" Naruto hadn't really been to the bridge before the final encounter with Zabuza and Haku, so he didn't see how bad morale really was.

Tazuna didn't even bother to hide the sadness from his face. "It's been happening more and more lately. People are losing hope, most will probably tell you that its already lost and that we should just give up and try to survive." It made him so angry and upset that very few were willing to fight to not be treated like this. "Survival isn't enough for me. At least not for the future I want for my family. I haven't always been a nice man, but Tsunami and Inari deserve a happy life free of this country and the people's fear of him are crippling." They should be able to open their door and not be surprised when there isn't a man threatening to hurt them there. They should be able to walk freely and without fear just to enjoy the scenery." Even if he had to finish this bridge by himself Tazuna would do it. For his family's future happiness.

"How many workers do you think you'd need to get the bridge done faster?" Naruto was already going to help by getting rid of Gatō sooner rather than later, but he had an army at his fingertips and Tazuna was a good man in his book. One deserving of as much help as he could give.

Tazuna went back to going over their inventory having put the conversation out of his mind. "We started with a hundred workers or there about. We're down to less than 30 now. If we somehow got back to where we started then maybe we could get things back on schedule, but there's no way that'll happen. Gatō's hold of this country and the people's fear of him are crippling." Frankly Tazuna was surprised he still had some 30 people willing to work for nothing and no promise of restitution if and when things got better.

Naruto nodded. "So you need at least 70 more workers, let's call it an even 80 just to be safe." He brought his hands together and started channeling a massive amount of chakra. "**Tajū Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Multiple Shadow Clone Technique)!**" Behind Naruto appeared a massive cloud of smoke that once cleared left a small army of the blonde just standing there. "Is this enough to help? I've never built a bridge before but I used to fix up my apartment all the time back home, so I know my way around tools. I'm a fast learner, but at the very least I can free up some of your more skilled workers to let them get back to what really needs doing."

Tazuna didn't stop himself from crying at the sight before him. How could he possibly say no to the offer of so much free help. For the first time in years Tazuna felt joy and openly wept at that feeling of hope that swelled within him. While he often spoke with bravado he never actually thought he'd be allowed or able to finish his bridge. He didn't say anything as he watched the blonde disperse himself all over the bridge silently watching how some things were done and replacing his workers who were transporting the materials they needed. "Thank you." His voice cracked as he spoke but he didn't care.

Naruto shrugged his shoulders. "Don't sweat it Oji-san. Just try and be careful with 'em. They're fragile and dispel easily, but don't worry I can make more if I need to."

Tazuna only nodded his head and after collecting himself walked back into the thick of the work area. He felt a renewed energy sweep over him and his steps were made with a bit more confidence than before.

Naruto stood back and watched with a satisfied smile as Tazuna and the rest of the people of Nami started looking just a bit happier than they were a moment ago. He always enjoyed helping people.

"That was nice of you Naruto." Asuma was leaning against a tree at the base of the bridge that was connected to the land. "I'd say I'm worried you might have used too much chakra, but I get the feeling you know your limits better than I. Instead I'll just make sure your okay." He allowed his eyes to roam over the bridge impressed by what he saw. "So...you okay?"

Naruto turned his head and smiled. "I'm okay sensei. This is nothing!"

Asuma let out a boisterous laugh. "You know kid sometimes I'm jealous of you." It went unsaid that Asuma was referring to his limitless energy. "I don't think there's a shinobi alive who could do what you just did and shrug it off as nothing. Hell, I don't even think Nidaime-sama can do what you did, and that man created this jutsu." Asuma stop caring about why and how Naruto knew things and how to do them. He was far more interested in what Naruto was capable of. "I can't wait to see what else you can do Naruto. That goes for Shikamaru and Shino as well."

"I've never been one to conform sensei. I don't like to be normal. I guess to be fair I'm *not* normal." It isn't normal to have a giant chakra construct sealed in your gut as a baby, or to take yourself and two companions on a crazy gamble to try and change the past. "Normal is boring. It's much more fun to be abnormal. I think you'll be surprised by what we can do sensei." Naruto grinned like the sly fox sealed within his gut. Slightly unnerving but also playful. Still Naruto had things to accomplish here and couldn't play around as much as he may have wanted to, and he really wanted to. Being out of the village was refreshing and allowed him to be a bit more like his old self. "Speaking of sensei, we think Zabuza is alive."

"You three as well then?" Asuma wasn't that surprised. Shikamaru was probably the second smartest person in Konoha after his father. "What are your thoughts on Zabuza then Naruto?" What Asuma really meant was, 'what are you three up to?'

Naruto started frowning slightly knowing that it would be difficult to convince Asuma to follow along with their plan. "Well the hunter-nin was definitely Zabuza's ally. Shino said he found them watching the fight with his insects. Meaning he was there the entire time and didn't just stumble upon Zabuza as we were no doubt meant to believe. He tried to plant a beetle on him to track them but whoever that hunter was they're good. Shino said all his insects had been frozen solid."

Asuma nodded having reached a similar conclusion, though it was nice to have confirmation. The additional information on Zabuza's potential accomplice was also useful. 'Never heard of any techniques that can freeze something solid. Perhaps a bloodline.' Asuma assumed that if it was a person with a bloodline then they too were from Kiri. It made sense given the current state of affairs in Mizu no Kuni (Land of Water.) "What do you think we should do?"

"Well sadly there's not much we can do. We have no idea where they went, assuming our assumptions are even right. We don't have the resources or time to search the entire island and the smaller ones that make up Nami (Wave)." He could make an army of clones to scour the island but that would give them away. Naruto had to smile at Asuma looking surprised now. "All we can do is wait sadly. We know that eventually Zabuza will come to us. That gives us a small advantage." It also gave them an advantage but thus was the way of things.

"I agree with you, unfortunately." He lit another cigarette and took a long drag from it. Naruto was right. There wasn't much they could do without endangering Tazuna or his family.

They had a plan, but they had decided that it was ultimately more beneficial to wait until Gatō betrayed Zabuza to make their offer. As it was right now the man would have other options and Zabuza wouldn't betray a contract. "On the bright side you'll be back to 100% a lot sooner than Zabuza sensei. Should make the next duel easier, right?" Naruto had a foxy grin on his face.

"You three are going to get me killed; you know that, right?" Asuma laughed not believing they'd leave him to fight Zabuza alone.

Naruto laughed before turning serious. "Don't say that sensei! Shikamaru would be so sad if you died." Naruto felt a rather sizable group of people moving toward the bridge from the woods. "Sensei we're about to have company."

Asuma put the cigarette he was about to light back in the pack. "How many?"

Naruto focused for a second trying to differentiate all the separate signals he was receiving. "No more than 20. I don't sense any powerful signatures among them so the probability of there being a hidden shinobi is low." It wasn't impossible to hide from him, but it was difficult. No matter how much a shinobi suppresses themselves it's still there and the effort is noticed. These felt completely natural. This ordinarily meant they had no experience in utilizing chakra. Usually. It wasn't always the case, but Naruto had gotten good at differentiating between the two.

"Make two clones and **Henge (Transform)** one into me. Let's not give our client anything to worry about, shall we?" Asuma watched as Naruto silently and made two clones without any smoke to obscure their appearance. 'Impressive.' One of them turned into Asuma while Naruto silently stalked into the woods behind Asuma.

It wasn't hard for Asuma to find the group without Naruto's assistance, 'Thought it is nice having a sensor on the team,' but the group was making a lot of noise. They were obviously getting ready to attack something, either the bridge or the town. The assembled group was practicing their thrusts and slashes on trees. 'What a waste of perfectly good weaponry.' Asuma was dismayed that they didn't even seem to think that what they were doing was actually damaging their weapons not honing them. Asuma agreed with Naruto's conclusion that there was probably not a shinobi in the group. Asuma signaled for Naruto to follow his lead before he dropped down from their branch and walked into the bandit's clearing.

Despite how nonchalantly Asuma and Naruto had walked into the clearing it took quite a while for their presence to be noticed. When they finally were noticed it wasn't long before the bandits had reorganized and surrounded them. "Well, well, looky what we have here boys. A couple of lost souls." The group started laughing thinking that they'd have a proper warm up for their next action. "Give us all your valuables!" The leader of the group barked out.

Asuma wasn't intimidated by the glinting steel. "I'm giving you all one chance to go back from where you came from and never return." The entire group laughed in their faces. 'Clearly they've never encountered shinobi before.'

"That's not how this works buddy. There's twenty of us and two of you! Now give us your valuables or you die, but for causing us trouble we'll be talking the little boy with us. He should fetch a pretty price in the right circles." The leader was holding his sword to Asuma's chest now, confident that this would be the first part of an easy payday.

Asuma sighed. "If that's how you want to play it then so be it." Faster than the overconfident man could react Asuma had pulled out his trench knives and coated them with wind chakra before cutting clean through the man's wrist. He moved on to the next closest target ignoring the man's howls of pain. Still not believing what was happening Asuma had cut the next man's throat before the group finally regained control of their senses and tried to swarm the duo. It was easy for Asuma to parry, dodge, and counter their ineffective swings and it wasn't long before he had killed more than half the group. Seeing that he wasn't in anymore danger he decided to focus on how Naruto handled himself.

Asuma wasn't quite sure what he expected to see but Naruto was handling himself quite well. Not seemingly bothered by the disparity in number

between him and his opponents. Armed with a kunai in each hand Naruto was efficiently disabling or killing the ones foolish enough to try and cut him with their blades. Asuma admired Naruto's flexibility and creativity in the way he fought. Naruto used every limb, joint, and everything in between as a weapon. If he couldn't bring his kunai around to block a slash, then he'd use his arm to force the attacker's hand or arm away. If his hands were occupied he used his foot to lash out at one of the attackers. At one-point Naruto had been forced to drop one of his kunai and instead of reaching for another one he grabbed one of his attacker's arms and used it as a shield as his ally sliced through the flesh and the man lost his hand. Before Naruto punched him in the throat crushing his windpipe.

Once there were only a handful of opponents left they turned to flee but Naruto whipped around and hurled a handful of shuriken at each of their legs. After they fell to the ground Naruto silently and without hesitation went to them and cut their throats or stabbed them through the heart. Quick and relatively painless in execution. There was less blood than Asuma expected on Naruto given some of his actions. "Not bad Naruto but was it necessary to kill them?"

The boy was in the process of wiping the blood off his weapon on one of the dead man's shirts. Satisfied it was clean enough for the moment he stood up and shrugged. "They tried to kill me. Only seemed right I return the favor. I'm not as forgiving as I once was sensei." The thought of killing used to scare him. It scared him because he feared that people would begin to think he was the monster they always said he was. It wasn't until the war that Naruto got over that aversion. Sometimes people had to die for things to be better. Sometimes not killing somebody meant others would suffer. The men lying dead here no doubt caused countless amounts of suffering. They didn't deserve mercy. He wouldn't hesitate to take life ever again. Not after Sasuke.

"I understand. Do you need to talk about it?" Asuma was younger than Naruto when he had first had to kill another person and he could still see their face. Remember the look in their eyes as the life faded from them. 'Then there's the smell.' As far as Asuma knew this was Naruto's first real combat situation and he had killed several men in the process.

Naruto shook his head. "Not right now sensei. If I do need to talk about it, I'll do it with Shika. No offense to you sensei, but Shika and I just get each other."

"No offense taken Naruto. It's important you deal with things like this with somebody you trust. Usually it's the sensei or your teammates you turn to in times of need. That's what we and they are here for. To support you as you do them. The only thing I will insist on is that if you need to talk to someone you actually do it." Asuma had seen many shinobi and non-shinobi lose themselves to their unshared grief over the years. "If you don't you could very well end up like Kakashi one day. Make no mistake the man is an excellent shinobi...but he's not the best role model."

Naruto waved his hand dismissively much like Kakashi was oft to do. "Don't worry sensei. Shika and Shino won't let me become a mini Kakashi. Besides can you imagine Yoshino-san's reaction if I try to emulate him?" The thought made him laugh as much as it frightened him.

Asuma joined in on the laughter. "Good point." Once they had both calmed down. "Come on let's clean this up and get back to the bridge. We've wasted enough time."

Naruto nodded. "I've got this sensei." Naruto gathered up the bodies in one spot and weaved a couple hand signs. **"Doton: Chidōkaku (Earth Style: Mobile Core)."**

Asuma watched as the ground beneath the bodies sank before Naruto did the same technique again and the grassy terrain returned to normal. "Convenient." Asuma was also surprised. That jutsu was rarely seen outside Iwagakure no Sato (Village Hidden in the Stones). Asuma couldn't think of a single shinobi in Konoha who knew that technique besides Kakashi, and he was confident Kakashi had not used it around Naruto. 'Very interesting.' They were silent on the trip back to the bridge until they were within eyesight of their clones. "We'll set up some traps around the bridge and Tazuna's house tonight."

Naruto nodded. "Sounds like fun, but I doubt Zabuza or that fake hunter will fall for them." That and Naruto feared what killing them could mean for their plan and the mission. If an A-Rank shinobi couldn't handle this task that meant Gatō would seek out S-Rank talent. At this point that almost exclusively meant the Akatsuki. None of them would survive that encounter right now.

Asuma agreed wholeheartedly. "But it will slow any non-shinobi enough and most likely deter them from trying." Asuma was also considering that they'd have to eliminate Gatō. He was hopeful that his message had reached Konoha by now, but there was no way to know until they sent word back and there was no guarantee they'd be getting support. Only time would tell. He really hoped they got here soon so they could help him. They silently used **Kawarimi (Body Replacement)** to switch with Naruto's clones and resumed their post with nobody any the wiser that they were almost beset by thugs.

"Sensei?" Asuma hummed in response. "What was Kakashi-sensei like when he was younger?" In all their adventures and travels Naruto still knew very little about Kakashi. The man was always frustratingly elusive and unresponsive.

"Can't say I know him better than anybody else. Quite honestly the Kakashi of today isn't that different from the Kakashi of the past. He wasn't in the Academy very long so no one of our generation really got to know him. I don't even know if his teammates really got to know him either." The only people Asuma thought might've known Kakashi were Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina. Asuma could understand Kakashi a little bit. Every time the man got close to somebody they died. It was easy to see why Kakashi would believe in curses and think he was cursed. "I will say he's every bit as dedicated now as he was then. Gai would probably be the best bet if you want to know more."

Naruto felt sad that nobody apparently really knew Kakashi. "I see." Despite all the time he spent with Kakashi and how close they had gotten, Kakashi had always kept a cool distance from everybody. Never letting others in to his world. He had friends but that was it. Naruto always had to be careful around Kakashi. His sensitivity to negative emotions was disastrous around Kakashi. Since the man bottled everything up his sadness, anger, and pain were almost magnified. Naruto couldn't imagine how Kakashi got up every day feeling like that all the time.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and was painfully boring for the real Naruto who Asuma wouldn't allow to participant in the construction of the bridge. Finally, Tazuna was ready to call it quits for the day and Naruto sighed in relief. The walk back was equally uneventful, and they soon found themselves back at Tazuna's home.

"Tsunami I'm home!" Tazuna unabashedly threw the door open and walked in to the smell of food cooking. "How was your day sweetheart?"

"It was fine tou-san." She smiled at the man before turning her head to Shino. "Thanks to Shino-kun at least."

Tazuna sat down at the table and was about to go for his bottle before he stopped himself knowing Tsunami would get on his case about it. "Oh? Did something happen?"

"Nothing terrible. Shino-kun and I were walking through the market when a man attempted to rob me. He didn't get very far before Shino-kun stepped in and got the man to leave." Tsunami was used to situations like this happening. For the most part people tried not to take anything from each other understanding that they all had very little, but some people had just become so desperate they felt they had no other choice.

"Then I have much to thank you for Shino." Tazuna always worried that what he was doing would get Tsunami and Inari hurt. He always felt so sure that the risk was worth it to give them a better life, but it still bothered him.

"It is our duty to protect you and your family Tazuna-san. No thanks are necessary." From Shino's perspective this is what they were being paid for. Thanking them was unnecessary.

"In any case dinner will be ready soon." Tsunami had spent the rest of the afternoon preparing what amounted to a feast in Nami these days. "I hope you all are hungry." She had a growing boy of her own and knew that kids could always pack food away and figured it'd be even more drastic for shinobi.

Naruto smiled warmly and hungrily. "You bet we are!"

"Then you can help me set the table." Tsunami smiled and walked back into the kitchen to set the table with Naruto on her heels. She wasn't used to her home being so full, but it felt nice. It brought with it a feeling of normalcy. She set the table for seven tonight. "Inari! Dinner!"

Asuma poked his head into the kitchen. "Go ahead and start without us Tsunami-san. I'd like to get a report from Shikamaru and Shino on what happened to day. Please don't feel obliged to wait."

Tsunami didn't like starting a meal without everybody present, but neither did she like letting food get cold. The two feelings often conflicted with each other. "Alright, so long as your sure." Getting a nod in response she moved on. "Hurry up or your food will get cold."

This left Naruto alone with Tazuna's family which was slightly uncomfortable. Inari was in his Sasuke phase where he wanted everybody else to feel as miserable as he felt. Prone to lashing out at anybody who challenged his viewpoint. Naruto knew he had a habit of retaliating when provoked and unlike before he was far more capable of doing harm. If he wasn't careful he might seriously scar the boy more than he already was. 'Kids are hard to deal with.'

They began to eat in silence and it was incredibly awkward. Nobody said a word as Tazuna and Tsunami kept glancing at Inari who was picking at his food. Naruto hoped that the others got here quickly before...things happened.

"So Naruto-kun, what's it like being a shinobi?" Tsunami was hoping to quell the constricting silence with some conversation.

Naruto was mid bite as the question reached him. Yoshino had finally gotten it through his head not to speak with a mouth full of food. He chewed as quickly as he could so as to not appear rude. "It's a lot of hard work to be honest. If I'm not on a mission I'm usually training between ten and fourteen hours a day every day with one day off a week."

"Goodness that's a lot of work for a young man like yourself. Must you push yourself so hard? I mean you're so very young." Tsunami was genuinely shocked by the amount of work Naruto was putting into himself. Not really sure what training he was doing but working that much everyday was staggering.

"I push myself harder than most, but I don't want to risk losing the people I care about. For them I'll push myself past the breaking point and further if it means I can keep them safe." Naruto refused to let anybody he cared about die if he could help it. He wouldn't smother them, but he'd be nearby if they needed him. "I also have to consider potential enemies. In our line of work its better to assume that there's always somebody stronger than you out there. If you ever think you're on top than inevitably you will fall."

"That's an awful lot of responsibility to put on yourself Naruto-kun." Tsunami couldn't believe that a boy not much older than her son was speaking and talking the way he was.

Naruto shrugged. Protecting people was a burden that he had always carried. He was just happy to have people care about him now. "I don't mind it at all. I imagine it must be pretty unusual from your perspective though. Granted I'm not a normal genin by any meaning of the word but that desire to protect the people you care about is almost universal...at least in our village."

"I just can't imagine a place like that." Tsunami didn't want to think of her son taking on such a burden at a young age.

"And I can't imagine a place like this where there aren't any shinobi. The world is vast and full of many surprises." Naruto didn't see a problem with the way shinobi were raised and trained. Younger minds and bodies were just more conducive to learning. It might seem odd to a person unfamiliar with shinobi, but conversely their way of life was equally perplexing. Naruto couldn't possibly imagine not learning how to fight at Inari's age.

Inari snorted in disgust at Naruto. "If you know there's somebody stronger out there why do you even bother? The strong and powerful will always trample the weak."

"Because if I don't try and somebody I care about gets hurt I'd never be able to forgive myself." Naruto was growing apprehensive, he knew a conversation like this might happen. Asuma, Shikamaru, and Shino still weren't done talking about whatever it was they were discussing. He didn't want to hurt Inari more than he already was, but his mouth still moved faster than his brain at times especially if he was upset. Naruto tried to maintain a friendly countenance, but he knew it was a losing battle with Inari right now.

"Fighting is stupid if you know you can't win." To Inari it was simple. You were either weak or strong. You couldn't change it.

Naruto frowned. "How do you know you can't win if you don't try?" All his life people had told him he couldn't do things. He always had to fight for everything. Even the right to live was denied him on several occasions. "If you always give up then people are going to think they can do whatever they want without consequence." Naruto started smiling as he thought about all the people who thought he couldn't do anything. How his dreams were stupid and meaningless. He had proved them all wrong. The best revenge was to be better than them.

Inari hated Naruto. Every time he saw him he was smiling as if nothing was wrong with the world. It was sickening. "What does somebody like you

know about consequences anyway? You don't know what it's like here! I can't stand seeing you walking already smiling as if nothings wrong." Inari's shouting was hard to ignore. "You know nothing of our pain! Why won't you just leave us alone!?"

Naruto couldn't help himself and he started laughing. "Are you even listening to yourself? You say I don't know anything about you or what you've experienced, and you're right, but what do you know about me?" Naruto hated people who threw themselves a pity party all the time as if they were the only ones to ever experience pain and suffering. Everybody suffers. Some people can deal with the pain and try to move past it. Others choose to wallow in it. Naruto wouldn't allow himself to wallow in self-pity. "You really think you're the only person to have been hurt by the world? Well let me tell you of a story from my life then kid. I promise you won't like it."

"October 10th isn't an ordinary day in our village, it's the day most people celebrate the victory of one of our greatest heroes against a terrifying monster. Every year the village spends the day in mourning of the people who died to that monster. At night though it becomes a giant party. It also happens to be my birthday. You're probably thinking that's a great coincidence, right?" Naruto chuckled darkly, and it was obvious it was anything but a good thing. "For me October 10th is the worst day of my life year in and year out. See I had the unfortunate circumstance of being born on that day, as a result people look at me as the harbinger of that disastrous night. I know better than anybody how cruel people can be. I became a convenient scapegoat for all their pain, all their suffering, all the hurt and anger that they could muster they foisted onto me." Since the day he was born he had been cursed and never even knew why.

Shikamaru had walked in with Asuma and Shino halfway through Naruto's story. He wanted nothing more than to make Naruto forget everything bad that ever happened. A childish wish, but he found himself unable to forgive himself for not seeing how much pain Naruto had truly been in when they were younger. To have been oblivious to the darkness of his own home. For all their values and ideals that they espoused were held dearer than life they were quick to abandon them when times got hard.

Naruto took a breath to steady his nerves. He didn't like thinking about everything that ever happened. It hurt and was definitely a part of his life he'd rather forget. He didn't care that everybody was starting at him, and he didn't notice Shikamaru looking at him with deep sorrow in his eyes. The soft brown eyes that would melt away all his pain. "My tenth birthday was probably the worst. By that point I had learned to make myself scarce on October 10th and most times I'm not even in the village. But that year they were extra determined to punish me. They followed me all day. Made sure they could find me you see, and they were patient. Oh, were they patient that day. They knew if they acted too early they might be discovered, but if they waited until the festivities started then they knew they'd be alone with me. The celebration inevitably caused trouble and took up most of the resources the authorities had. So they waited patiently for night to fall." Not that Konoha had any real authorities left to police the village. The ANBU Black Ops had assumed much of the policing duties since the downfall of the Uchiha clan.

"They took turns watching me for hours while I sat alone in the woods waiting for the day to end. Eventually they came for me and that night became one of the few nights I wish they had actually succeeded in killing me, just so it would all end. They didn't kill me, but they certainly hurt me. One of them hit me over the head to knock me unconscious and when I came to I was tied to a tree and surrounded by a mob. They were all shouting obscenities at me and wishing death upon me. Then the *fun* really began." Processing the clone's memories had been extremely painful. To the point Naruto swore he'd never use that technique again. It was incredibly useful and had such potential, but he'd forever associate it with that pain.

"At first it was simple things like stabbing or cutting me with rusted blades, pulling my fingernails off, or just punching and kicking me. Their only goal was to make me scream, and scream I did. At least until one of them drove a sword into me just below my neck so I couldn't make anymore noise. They didn't want to risk my cries of pain being heard. After that it got worse. 'How could it possibly get worse?' You may be asking. You forget I'm from a shinobi village. Shinobi are capable of many feats of wonder and amazement. I became a target for many of them. They spat fire at me. Whipped me with water. Sent electricity arcing across my body. A couple of the less inventive sort just threw rocks at me." Naruto said that last part as if he were disgusted by their lack of creativity, and in a way he was. Anybody was capable of throwing rocks at somebody. These were shinobi. Assassins. Thieves. Killers. They should have been more creative.

"On and on it went for I honestly don't even know how long. Finally, one of the people meant to protect me acted and put an end to it all. The rest of the story doesn't matter at that point. So, tell me Inari. Do I know what it's like to feel pain? Do I know what it's like to suffer? Or do I know nothing of those feelings?" Naruto quietly got up from the chair and stopped himself from looking at anybody as he walked toward the door. As soon as his fingers landed on the handle he spoke one last time. "I smile and fight because I refuse to let anybody tell me I *can't* do something. My defiance in the face of their actions and words is my revenge against them. All my life they've tried to deny and end my existence. With each breath I take and each day I live I spit in their faces and taunt them, shouting that they've failed." He opened the door and quietly closed it behind him as he left.

"I'll go after him sensei." Shikamaru shoved his hands in his pockets and hurriedly, for a Nara at least, made to follow Naruto. Naruto never spoke about what really happened and Shikamaru never asked. He never hated the people of Konoha for their idiocy more than he did at this moment. Shikamaru quickly banished those thoughts in favor of finding Naruto.

Tsunami was shocked and silently crying at the story she just heard. How could she not? She had spent the entire time staring at Naruto as he spoke, and she could see the emotion in his eyes as he spoke. The pain. The sadness. The hatred. Then she saw something she hadn't expected to see. Sympathy. She couldn't understand who or what the boy felt sympathy for. For Inari? For them? She didn't know. "Is..." She found her voice failing her. "Is all that really true? Did they really do those things to Naruto?"

Asuma lit another cigarette not caring if he wasn't supposed to smoke inside. "Honestly? I don't know. Naruto rarely talks about his past and all his medical records have been classified. I mean beyond the normal doctor-patient confidentiality everybody experiences. As his jōnin instructor I'm authorized to view reports on his health but even I don't have the clearance necessary to know how Naruto's doing or how he's been in the past." Nobody ever spoke of what happened to Naruto. The best they had were rumors and hearsay from people who claimed they were there or spoke to somebody who was there. All Asuma remembers is a slew of punishments and people disappearing that followed after that day. He also remembered how happy Anko and Ibiki were for months. "I'm inclined to believe it just from what I know has happened to him before."

"Yes they did, and more that we do not know about. As close as I am to Naruto-san I do not know the full extent of his pain. I doubt very much that Shikamaru-san knows how deep it goes and Naruto-san is closer to him than anyone." Shino wasn't often one to allow his emotions to govern his behavior but listening to Naruto speak had been difficult and he wanted nothing more than to reach out to his friend. To comfort him.

For the ones who spent their entire lives around Naruto knowing his tells was second nature. If it was truly something that bothered him Naruto would never address it aloud. Always bottling it away to be forgotten and suppressed until the end of time. Naruto knew people would see through his carefully crafted mask if he spoke the truth of his pain. "What I do know is that Naruto-san will never allow somebody else to dictate his life. If they tell him he cannot do something, he will do it just to spite and taunt them." Shino bowed to Tsunami in apology. "If you will excuse me, I no longer feel hungry." He quietly left the house and jumped up onto the roof to be alone and think. And to keep an eye on his friends.

Asuma watched as each of his students disappeared through the door one by one. "I don't know what happened to you kid, but Naruto is right that everybody suffers. You can keep doing what you're doing and let people like Gatō walk all over you. Or you can do what your grandfather's doing and fight back." He looked at Tsunami who was still crying. "I'm sorry for breaking your rules. I'll be outside." Asuma kept the cigarette in his mouth as he walked to the door. "Before you go wishing that we'd leave Inari ask yourself what would happen to your grandfather if we did leave. You've got a grandfather, a mother, a roof over your head, and warm food on your table. I can name ten people off the top of my head who'd give an arm and a leg to swap places with you."

It didn't take Shikamaru long to find Naruto. There weren't a lot of places he could go without being noticed so he was just sitting on the edge of the pier with his knees huddled to his chest. "Ruto?" The eyes that looked up at him broke Shikamaru's heart. "Do you want to talk about it?" Naruto shook his head no. "Do you want to be alone?" Another no. Shikamaru did what he always did if Naruto got visibly upset. He sat down behind Naruto, pulled him toward his chest, and rested his chin on his shoulder. "You know you don't have to hurt alone anymore, right Ruto?"

Naruto didn't say anything. He just sank deeper into Shikamaru's arms and silently let himself start to cry. Shikamaru could count the number of times he's seen Naruto cry on one hand. It was just one of those things that didn't happen often. "It's not okay Ruto. I'm never going to lie to you about that, but you'll always have me." He rubbed Naruto's arms. "You have Shino, my mother, my father, the Nara clan. We're all here to support you Ruto. You just have to let us. You make all of our worlds a bit brighter everyday you're around. Don't try to shoulder everything alone Ruto."

"I love you." It was a quiet whisper, but its volume was deafening in the silence.

"I know. It should be obvious how I feel by now." Nothing more was said as they sat there in the quiet of the night. Naruto liked to say the words, but Shikamaru preferred to demonstrate it.

They sat there in silence and Shikamaru lost track of time. His only focus was on his blonde. Once he felt the silent sobs and the tears stop Shikamaru turned Naruto's head so he could look at him. "Are you ready to go back?" He got a nod. "Alright then let's go." He helped Naruto stand up and interlaced his fingers with Naruto's. "You need sleep." Walking back inside the house was silent and the only person they saw near was Asuma. "Go on Ruto, I'll be up in a minute." The both watched as Naruto silently made his way upstairs to the room they all shared.

"Kid gonna be okay?" Asuma didn't think he had ever seen Naruto look like that. He had seen Naruto without the happy go lucky attitude, but he had never seen him look so empty. It was truly disheartening to see a person who almost always smiled not.

"I'm not sure Naruto even knows what okay feels like sensei. But he should be fine by morning." Naruto always bounced back quickly.

"And what about you?" It was asking a lot of Shikamaru to take on Naruto's past. Asuma genuinely believed it would be too much for either of them to handle.

Shikamaru didn't know how to answer. It wasn't him who was hurt, but he had known it would happen and let it happen. It may have been Naruto's idea, but he had gone along with it. Ignored his heart and mind that said it was a terrible idea. "So long as Naruto's okay I'll be okay sensei."

"I'm concerned your both trying to take on too much. The darkness of the world is vast and deep Shikamaru. It's easy to get lost in and hard to find your way out." Asuma liked to think he was skirting around that darkness as well as could be expected, but it was so easy to step foot in there and not even realize it until you're too far gone. As unfortunate as it was Naruto had been bathed in it for years with nobody noticing. He needed real help to deal with his issues. The kind of help Shikamaru wasn't ready or qualified to handle.

"Naruto is the light of this world sensei. When he's happy other people around him can't help but be happy too. It's an annoyingly special part of him. I don't know if he or I will ever be okay, but are any of us truly okay? As you said darkness is everywhere. We shinobi are steeped in it, but when I'm around Naruto it feels brighter. That's enough for me." Shikamaru started walking past Asuma. "I need to go now sensei. Naruto doesn't do well if he's alone at night when he's like this."

"Go on. I'll handle the trap setting and watch for tonight." Today had been going so well for Asuma as well. They prevented an attack that nobody knew about. He had received a message that a team had been dispatched to assist him and would be here within the next two days. 'And then this thing with Naruto happens.' He wasn't trying to blame Naruto. Nothing that had happened was the boy's fault, but it needed to be dealt with and he doubted very much that Naruto wanted to confront it and he doubted that Shikamaru would make him. 'If Kakashi weren't so Kakashi he'd be perfect to handle this.' With nothing left to do Asuma sat around thinking on his turn on night watch until he decided to go leave some surprises for anybody who tried to get near.

The next two days passed without incident and Asuma once again found himself on the last night watch. 'Why is it always me?' He hated this watch the most. It was always when the body was about to reach its deepest sleep and he had to fight to wake himself up and keep from falling asleep. He was outside smoking on the branch of one of the nearby trees where just yesterday his backup had arrived.

Asuma was smoking in the branches when he heard a familiar whistle. He dropped down to the ground after putting his cigarette out. Asuma whistled the expected reply and a moment later two men appeared next to him. "Aoba, Raidō. Good to see you both. Where's the rest of your team?"

Raidō nodded in greeting to Asuma. "Asuma. Hayate and Genma are bringing Ibiki and Anko the gifts you left them."

Aoba snickered a little bit thinking about how much Anko was going to love her gifts. "What's the situation?"

Asuma went through the rundown of what had happened thus far much to Aoba's and Raidō's amazement. The client's deception as to the exact nature of the mission almost cost them dearly. This was easily an A-Rank mission and not meant for a bunch of genin. At least as far as Raidō was concerned. "We'll need to deal with Tazuna after this is over Asuma." There were rules in place for such occurrences, and Konoha would have its due one way or another. "In any case we're here to help. What do you want us to do?" Raidō would defer to Asuma since this was his mission.

Asuma agreed about Tazuna and already had a plan but they needed to tie up all the loose ends first. "I want you both to try and find out what's happened to the Daimyō and his family." The ruler's peculiar absence during this was unusual, and if somebody has toppled the old regime in a country so close to Hi no Kuni that could spell trouble. "Be back before week's end. That's about when I expect Zabuza to recover and you're help would be greatly appreciated for that fight." That would give them three days to figure out what was going on with the Daimyō.

"What about Zabuza's accomplice? You really want to leave them to the kids?" Aoba wasn't as up to date on Asuma's merry band of genin and jōnin so didn't think they'd be able to cut it in the type of fight they could expect the next time.

"Trust me, they'll be fine. Just get back as soon as you can." Asuma had faith that they could handle the accomplice. Naruto could exhaust anybody given enough time. Shikamaru was a bonafide genius. Shino's insects were as versatile as they were deadly. Asuma wasn't worried about the accomplice. Zabuza was another matter. Besides if he had his way they wouldn't be fighting Zabuza and his accomplice again anyway.

Aoba still looked skeptical but Raidō was his squad leader and he was going to defer to Asuma. "If you're sure then Asuma. Good luck." Skeptical or not Aoba would trust his superiors.

"See you soon Asuma." Raidō and Aoba disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

The rest of the day had been normal and Asuma was confident in his assessment that Zabuza would be down for at least another two days. "I hate the waiting." Waiting for a fight always made him uneasy. Anticipation was always worse than the actual fight and right now Asuma was going over different scenarios in his head. He was determined to find a way to win without losing a member of his team or any limbs. So far, he was coming up empty. He sighed and flicked his cigarette toward the ground where he stomped it out. Asuma started walking back to the house to wake up his team for another day of guard duty. 'It's going to be a long two days.'

He had come to a decision that would shape their activities here. As much as Asuma wanted to believe he and his team would be fine he found himself doubting that assertion. Zabuza was hard enough for him to handle on his own and the fight had been interrupted before he had seen how Shikamaru and Naruto contributed. Now Zabuza had an accomplice at the very least capable of quickly and silently neutralizing any of them within a moment's notice.

Naruto was a good sensor from what he could tell. Yet he was confused as to what limitations the boy had. Most sensors felt chakra. Naruto felt chakra AND negative emotions. But was it one or the other, or did he feel both at once? Did his emotional sensing have the same range as his chakra sensing? Naruto had said that Shino found the hunter. Did that mean the hunter didn't have any negative emotions for Naruto to sense? Were they so skilled at hiding their presence Naruto couldn't feel them? Or was Naruto just too focused on his battle with Zabuza to notice? There were too many unanswered questions.

Asuma had a plethora of questions that were being evaded if he even tried to pry answers from the genin. The lack of answers and cooperation left him with only one option. If they were to complete this mission successfully, they had to preemptively strike Zabuza. Problem being Naruto was also right they didn't have the resources for a dragnet search. That left one option. Find and eliminate Gatō.

Gatō was the money behind everything. Zabuza. The thugs. The pirates. Everything in Nami was being funded through or by Gatō. This made him the obvious target, and one that would be significantly easier to deal with than Zabuza and his mystery accomplice. Which looped him back around to the original problem. They didn't know where to find Gatō either. Asuma doubted the man was brazen enough to take over whatever home the Daimyō enjoyed but assumptions were dangerous, and he had been making a lot of those lately.

Asuma had come up with two plans, that were really the same plan just executed differently. Gatō was exploiting the townspeople for all they were worth. Somebody had to collect the spoils. The spoils had to make it to Gatō. Ergo they follow Gatō's men who are doing the collecting and they'd find Gatō. 'A man like Gatō isn't going to trust anybody but himself with his wealth.' They would try to follow one of Gatō's men as well as use Shino's insects to track their movements.

They had had three days before he expected Zabuza to be in a position to fight. Now they had two and there was no sign of any of Gatō's collection men. He didn't know their schedule and the people were too scared to provide any information. Since Tazuna and his family were one of the few not being exploited in that manner they had no idea. The whole thing was frustrating and making him curse Kakashi for jinxing this mission.

"Are you alright sensei?" Shino had been out doing some light exercises when he found Asuma lost in thought.

"It's been a day and we have no leads. I'm not alright." Asuma hoped Raidō and Aoba would be back tomorrow so at the very least if they had to fight Zabuza he'd stand a better chance, but for all he knew they were both dead.

"We have only been on this path for a day. It may yet bear fruit." Patience was a virtue that the Aburame embraced wholeheartedly. So many things took time to accomplish. You could try and force the issue to happen sooner but more often than not you made it take longer after expending energy and resources. Waiting is sometimes the best option.

"If we wait much longer I'm concerned about the safety of the team." Asuma wanted desperately to know more of their capabilities but not at the risk of one of their lives. He knew *they* believed they were up to the challenge but since they weren't very forthcoming with information Asuma couldn't afford to make decisions based on their beliefs.

"Then perhaps we should consider an alternative path to Gatō." If they couldn't follow Gatō's money there were plenty of other things they could try.

"If you have any ideas I'm all ears Shino." Asuma wanted to end this mission and soon. Fighting Momochi Zabuza with a team of genin was not on his list of goals.

"Gatō will keep a sizable force nearby to guard himself and enforce his rule. We know he hires the worst of the worst and they have needs of their own that Gatō must fulfill." Food, water, alcohol, women. The staples of vagrants and lowlifes. "If we cannot follow the money then we must follow their needs. As much as it pains me to suggest we should be focusing our efforts on the brothels and hope Gatō's men come by to collect some. Gatō may not allow his men to go there but there's nothing stopping them from taking women as payment." They already knew Gatō smuggled people as well as drugs, but he had to take people from somewhere. Shino was certain Nami was one of those places.

It had taken the better part of a day but finally they had found Gatō. The man had built a massive compound deep in one of the forests that backed up against the coast and getting there would be a pain in the ass for non-shinobi. It was close enough for him to make a journey to one of the major ports if necessary, but isolated enough so as to detect intruders easily. He could make out a small dockyard and a couple warehouses. 'Interesting.' Gatō had built his own port away from the others and out of sight of any prying eyes.

Asuma was high in the trees as he looked across the sprawling compound extending before him. Shino was correct in his assumption Gatō would

keep his 'army' close for protection. There was one permanent structure and a tent city surrounding it. He had estimated the number of samurai, thugs, bandits, and other fighters to be between 200 and 250 people. Even for him that was a potentially dangerous number. A single shinobi could easily fight off dozens of enemies by themselves, but not hundreds. If they wanted to get to Gatō, which he did, they had to deal with his army as well. Leaderless they might just unleash themselves on the world.

Fortunately for Asuma he saw very little discipline in the camp itself. These were nothing more than glorified bandits at this point. Things were orderly and structured at the point where Asuma suspected the leader had set up his tent. As the camp radiated outward discipline became lax. It would make it easier for what he had planned. The group was sizable but nothing that he and his team couldn't handle. Many of them would take comfort in their numbers and not attack immediately once they appeared. That brief moment of surprise would be all they need to kill dozens of them, instill fear in them, and then they could break their fighting spirit.

"We're going to hit the camp as a unit. I want you three to stick together and watch each other's backs. Identify the leaders and eliminate them first. If you can prevent them from escaping but under no circumstances are you to pursue them." The last thing Asuma needed was the team to be split apart. If they were isolated from each other this would be a dangerous situation, but if they stuck together it'd be smooth sailing. "We'll sneak in and eliminate as many as we can, alright?"

Asuma heard each of his students say, "Hai sensei."

"Alright then we attack at midnight." A nighttime raid would only add to their advantage. He suspected a large portion of the group would be drunk and lethargic. "Shino, I want you to use your insects to scout the camp. Keep an eye out for any shinobi, prisoners, and if you find Gatō I don't want to lose him in the chaos when we attack. Naruto, I want you and Shikamaru to head back and gather up as much alcohol as you can. Let's help these people celebrate to the best of our ability." He doubted they'd turn down free alcohol, but he wouldn't risk poisoning it and raising their guard.

The boys silently carried out his orders while he and Shino continued to observe and monitor the camp. It was midday and they still had several hours to go. "Let me know if you find anything important Shino." Asuma went back to watching the camp intently while Shino scouted it. 'I am grateful to have an Aburame here for this.' He could easily scout the camp himself or use Naruto's clones, but nobody really bats an eye at insects. Even the best infiltrated gets noticed at some point.

Shino was concentrating on linking his senses with his kikaichū. Ordinarily he relied on his queen to relay the information from the drones, but it was possible for him to communicate directly with them and get the information directly. Such a thing was dangerous if there was a risk of combat as his own senses around his body would be dulled. In this instance Asuma was here and they knew Zabuza was still incapacitated which meant Haku would be by his side. The risk was low.

His insects flew into the camp relatively unnoticed. A few were swatted at and a handful died from casual fly swatting, but nobody was overly concerned with their presence. Shino felt anger at his insects being destroyed. This anger extended beyond his specific insects to include any insect. It wasn't that surprising that a family with such a close bond to insects would develop a fondness for them. He pushed his anger inside focusing instead on having them scout for their targets.

As they flew through the buildings Shino had his initial suspicions confirmed. The first warehouse his insects came across was full of narcotics and weapons. In one of the warehouses were a series of cages. Housed within were people, mostly women and young girls, but some men and boys mixed in as well. There was nothing in the area to indicate what would become of the people. "Sensei. The warehouse closest to the water is being used to cage people. For what purpose I do not know."

"I'm sure we can both imagine what will become of those people. I want you to monitor the area and find out as much as you can. How many guards are there. Patrol patterns. Things like that but keep looking for Gatō." All this was pointless if they didn't have an idea where the man would be. Asuma had hoped that Gatō hadn't established his smuggling operation here. It was unfortunate for them that their mission was not to rescue these people. Technically speaking their mission was not even to assassinate Gatō or his army, but Asuma was interpreting his orders to protect Tazuna broadly. There wasn't a feasible way to justify the risk of rescuing those people given the mission parameters, but he'd still be informed in the event an opportunity presented itself.

Shino focused on an insect that was heading toward the only other permanent structure in the area. It was assumed this is where Gatō would stay while he was in country. As his insects began to search the interior they found copious signs of Gatō's presence. Every room and hallway was filled with adornments that boasted about wealth. It was lavish and ostentatious. The ground floor contained an extravagant kitchen and dining room where Gatō no doubt entertained his business partners before moving into a more comfortable sitting room. One would think that these rooms belong in the palace of a great king and not a businessman.

The second floor was much plainer than the ground but still as expressive. The stairs opened up into an exquisite art gallery that showcased rare and priceless pieces from every nation and from times before the Great Nations were even a figment of thought. Attached to it was a series of smaller rooms. An office, a bathroom, a bedroom, and a storage room. In the office was where Shino located Gatō who was pouring over a stack of documents with evident glee on his face.

"Sensei, I have found Gatō." Shino spoke as soon as his mind cleared from the haze of no longer feeling like an insect. "The large structure appears to be his home and workplace. I encountered no guards inside the building itself but there were two men at each entryway. There is a great deal of wealth within the home as well." Tazuna owed Konoha a debt he just didn't know it yet. They all knew they could not pay what was owed and it would take years to recoup the cost, but if they could 'appropriate' such wealth from Gatō things might be even between them.

"Good work Shino. Keep a few insects on Gatō at all times." Asuma had to admire the man's bravery and tenacity to establish himself so close to two major powers without them noticing. "How exactly does the poison your insects secrete effect the body Shino?" Asuma would like to reduce their numbers by a significant margin if he could shortly before their attack began.

"The rinkaichū begin by borrowing into the target's flesh and secreting a numbing agent to neutralize the target's nerve impulses that might warn of danger. Then a second poison is injected when they bite the subcutaneous tissue. The poison itself causes necrosis and the infected tissue begins to die immediately. Depending on the amount of poison injected and the number of rinkaichū swarming a target the corruption begins to spread in all possible directions." Shino had a healthy respect for the danger of his insects. A few times he had been poisoned, by accident, by the hive and the feeling was quite unpleasant. "The poison and insects can be extracted safely and at this time I am immune to their effects." That immunity had taken years to build but was well worth it in the end.

"I see." Asuma was very impressed with the diversity of Aburame insects, and intimidated. It was hard to deny that they were a powerful asset to a shinobi, but even he had to acknowledge how frightening they seemed. 'I can only imagine the other species the Aburame are familiar with but

cannot or do not utilize.' His body broke out in goosebumps as his imagination worked in overdrive to bring his fantasy to reality. "How many do you think you could eliminate quickly and with little risk just before our attack begins?"

Shino thought long and hard about the question while also trying to identify the biggest targets. "I believe I could neutralize no more than two dozen of their number. I base this on the decision that you would prefer I eliminate those with larger chakra presences as they would be the bigger threats. They would die relatively quickly if I utilized my entire colony of rinkaichū. However, to avoid detection I would need to start sending them in now." A large swarm of insects was easy to notice. While the rinkaichū were smaller than the kikaichū they still made noise when in large groups.

"Get started then. I hadn't planned on leaving the area anyway." Asuma was glad he had Naruto leave clones to guard Tazuna and his family. He had insisted the bridge builder feign illness from his travels to avoid having to work overtime to protect him, the bridge, the house, and his family. Naruto could make an army of clones but would still tire after a while.

For the next few hours Asuma and Shino sat in silence while they carried out their respective duties. Asuma was watching for any new developments that might impact their operation while Shino was still sneaking his insects into the compound and planting them on or near his identified targets. Asuma heard Shikamaru and Naruto approaching. "Welcome back. Any problems?"

"No problems sensei." Naruto proceeded to pull out a large storage scroll and unseal its contents. "We managed to find four barrels of ale."

"Good work." Asuma wasn't going to ask how exactly they acquired them. He probably didn't want to know. Nor did he really care. "Naruto reseal the barrels in the scroll and sneak them into the camp unnoticed." Not even bothering to wonder if Naruto could do it. The kid had been outrunning the ANBU for years. If he could do that then this camp should be no problem. He watched as Naruto created another **Kage Bunshin (Shadow Clone)** and then used **Henge (Transformation)** to become a squirrel. "Sometimes I wonder if you're really that good or if the ANBU were just lazy."

Naruto smiled. "A little of both. I'm by no means the best at infiltration, but I'm better than most. I think you also know by now that the ANBU and the jōnin, sorry sensei, have been lazy in these peaceful times."

"I can't say you're wrong. My encounter with Zabuza is proof enough of that. Granted the man is and was a monster in his own right teamed up with other monsters. Still I should have been able to perform better." Asuma sighed and cried internally as he thought of what he was going to do once he got back. "I'm going to have to ask Gai for help."

Shikamaru looked at his teacher sadly. "I'm sorry sensei. Maybe you'll survive." He was patting Asuma on the arm finding it odd to be so much shorter than Asuma from the last time he tried this. "I promise I'll let you win a few games of shōgi sensei."

Asuma smiled and barked out a laugh. "I'll believe it when I see it. A Nara losing to non-Nara. That'll be the day."

Asuma kept laughing as Shikamaru joined in. Naruto just watched fondly. He missed having that kind of relationship. Jiraiya may not have always been there but they were so alike in personality that it always amused and annoyed people. He could never imagine having that kind of relationship with Kakashi. The man was simply too afraid of himself to ever laugh like that.

As night fell Asuma and the team were mentally preparing themselves for what was to come. With any luck once they had cut down a couple dozen of them that the rest would flee. Asuma figured it'd probably be closer to a third or half before they actually started to panic and flee. "Shino get started with your insects. Once you're done let me know and we'll move in." He got a nod in response from Shino. "We'll go quietly for as long as we can. Focus on the sentries and patrols. Once the alarm is raised don't hesitate to utilize the most powerful techniques you can. Take out as many as you can before they have time to rally."

It would be another fifteen minutes before Shino would indicate that his insects had been set to work and begun to kill their targets from within. "Good, then let's go. Remember quick and silent." Asuma started to creep forward toward the first set of sentries. There were two pairs on either side of a makeshift guard post. Using hand signals, he assigned a target to each of the genin. He sent Naruto and Shino, being two of the quieter ones, to sneak around and get ready to attack from behind while he and Shikamaru remained in the tree line. Once he got the signal that they were in position Asuma snapped a branch and hoped one or two of them would come to investigate.

His hopes were answered as two of the sentries walked toward where they heard the noise. They called out a challenge for anybody to reveal themselves. 'Do people really expect that to work? If the cause of the noise doesn't immediately reveal itself, it's probably not friendly.' When the challenger got no response, he pushed the other man forward who started to walk into the woods. Asuma signaled for Naruto and Shino to take the rear guard and for Shikamaru to use his shadow to strangle the other man. Once he saw his team taking action he rushed the one remaining man and slit his throat with his trench knife while smothering his mouth waiting for blood loss to claim him. Once the man was done bleeding out Asuma let the body drop to see his team making sure the sentries were dead and out of sight.

Asuma had the team move from tent to tent and silently eliminate the occupants. Asuma wasn't sure how many people they had killed but they had managed to hit twenty tents with between two and four people in each of them before somebody finally caught site of them. "Stay close and use your jutsu now!" Asuma proceeded to turn to the group of tents to his right that they hadn't had time to enter yet. Focusing chakra to his mouth Asuma unleashed a stream of fire at the tents. "**Katon: Karyu Endan (Fire Style: Dragon Flame Bullet)!**" A series of painful screams followed as the tents erupted into a blaze that lit up the entire area. Asuma rushed the small group of men that had formed up with their weapons who were intent on killing them.

Naruto decided to use the flames to expand the area of effect and created five clones. Each of whom thrust their palms forward in an arc as they expelled chakra from their hands. "**Fūton: Daitoppa (Wind Style: Great Breakthrough)!**" The flames now empowered by a gust of wind were carried out in a 60-degree arc from the group and proceeded to set ablaze even more of the camp. The fires would continue to grow in intensity and spread as the battle progressed. Naruto saw more and more people surrounding Asuma and went to help the man. 'I really need to learn kenjutsu.' A kunai just wasn't as conducive to this kind of combat.

Shikamaru preferred to stay hidden in the shadows to better aid his jutsu. Right now, he had used his **Kage Nui no Jutsu (Shadow Stitching Technique)** to skewer a handful of bodies together and was using the mass as a battering ram to hurl into anybody within reach. It was a morbid way to use shadows but the more people he killed the larger the mass would become. Since the fires were casting all sort of shadows around it made using his techniques all the easier.

Having spent the entire day watching the camp he didn't feel any kind of remorse at what he was doing and how he was doing it. All he kept

thinking about was how these men had throughout the course of the afternoon and evening gone to where Gatō had people held prisoner and taken them to the camps to be their entertainment. Having to hear all of it without doing anything was one of the most difficult experiences of his life. So, if he turned their corpses into a mass of human flesh that would kill the others it was no skin off his bones.

Like Shikamaru, Shino preferred to avoid direct confrontation. He simply allowed his insects to swarm in mass at anybody not intelligent enough to join a group for survival. Slowly but surely, he was picking off the loners in the dark without anybody knowing. He'd send his insects to quickly drain their strength before approaching and stabbing them through the heart.

Shino was in the process of extracting his kunai when a voice called out behind him. "Only cowards attack in the dark of night like this."

Shino pulled the kunai free from the man he'd just killed. "No." He turned to face the voice and saw a man in armor consistent with that of a samurai from Tetsu no Kuni (Land of Iron) minus the helmet. "It is the shinobi way."

The man growled and drew his sword. "You have no honor!"

Shino calmly replied, "I see very little honor in what you and your compatriots are doing here."

The samurai responded by using **Issen (Flash)** with his katana to shoot a concentrated blast of chakra at Shino. With the short distance between them Shino wasn't able to dodge out of the way. Rather than have blood shoot out though the samurai watched as Shino dissolved into a mass of bugs. "Come out and face me coward!"

Shino threw his voice to confuse the samurai as to his actual location. "Why would I do that? As I stated earlier, to strike from the shadows is the way of shinobi." To illustrate his point Shino threw a handful of shuriken at the samurai who easily deflected them with his katana before shooting another **Issen (Flash)** at where the shuriken came from. "As you can see, I have the advantage here so long as you cannot find me." While he was talking Shino was quietly redirecting some of his rinkaichū who had finished killing their targets to converge on the samurai.

The samurai raged at Shino's cowardice. "You'll never be able to kill me from the shadows! So, come out and face me!"

This time Shino didn't reply. Instead he began focusing on the samurai's armor trying to find gaps he could send his insects into. Armor was not unlike that of a puppet, meaning that the weak points would be the joints. Shino did his best through the darkness and flickering fire light to look at the joints that held the samurai's armor together. Though unable to create single pieces of armor the samurai of Tetsu no Kuni had added extra plates of armor to surround the joints to negate that disadvantage. It was effective against conventional weapons, but his insects weren't conventional. Shino decided to have his insects converge on the joints regardless and try to get between the gaps. As soon as the first one reported success he had the rest converge as well. The fight was as good as won. It was only a matter of time now.

Once he felt his insects had sufficiently invaded the samurai's body Shino revealed himself. "Finally decided to show yourself have you coward?" Shino stood motionless which only served to irk the man's ire more. "Have you nothing to say?"

"I find this avenue of discussion meaningless. We are on opposing sides we have nothing to discuss, unless it is your surrender." Shino pulled out two kunai and charged at the samurai who on instinct tried to bring his sword up to protect himself. Shino could tell by the man's armor and his sword that he had failed to complete all of his training. 'It would explain his presence here.' The training for the samurai was just as intense for a shinobi. Unlike shinobi the samurai had fewer ways to succeed and many more to fail.

"Never!" When the samurai found his sword arm uncooperative he looked surprised. It was still raised in front of him, but he couldn't move his arm, after another moment the arm dropped and hung limply at his side. He tried to raise his arm again but again got no movement. "What have you done to me!?" The samurai tried to grab the sword with his other hand but only got halfway before his arm dropped to hang like the other.

Shino used the **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** to appear behind the samurai and used his kunai to strike at the man's exposed jugular. As the samurai was unable to defend himself both kunai sank into the soft tissue with a squelch before Shino dragged upward across the blood vessel opening the wound wider before he pulled the kunai free. "I have killed you." Shino started extracting his insects from the man before proceeding onto the next solitary opponent.

It only took half an hour for Team Asuma to kill a significant portion of the assembled bandit army and for the rest to flee. Once the team had regrouped there was only one target left for them to handle. Gatō. "Shino is Gatō still inside the house?"

Shino shook his head no. "He has fled toward the wharf sensei."

Asuma nodded. "Let's go. This is all for naught if he escapes." The quartet took off toward the dock intent on catching up to Gatō before he escaped. They were fortunate that Gatō had decided to build everything in one area. It made it that much easier to catch up with him. After dispatching his two personal bodyguards Asuma looked down at the small sniveling man who was fearing for his life for the first time. "Going somewhere?"

"P-p-please d-d-don't kill me! I'll give you anything!" Gatō had never been more afraid in his life. Nobody had ever dared to stand up to him like this and actually get far enough to threaten him. Tazuna, Kaiza, Temba, Hiromi, were a few names he remembered as fools who had tried to stand against him. He had silenced them all, until now.

"It's a tempting offer," And it was. Asuma knew that Gatō had a massive *legitimate* business to hide his illicit activity. Nevertheless, making a deal with Gatō was like making a deal with the devil. Too much trouble, not enough reward. Asuma saw Gatō's fear dissipate slightly at hearing he might be able to buy his way out. "but it's much easier just to kill you and take what we need." The fear returned to Gatō's face as Asuma cut the man's throat and severed the arteries in his legs and kicked him into the water.

Asuma sighed and looked at his team. The battle had been easy but each of them still suffered some cuts and bruises, nothing too serious but it certainly looked like they had been in a fight. "Good work all of you." Looking down at himself Asuma was in a similar state. It was simply impossible for him to keep up with the sheer numbers and not take some damage. "Naruto and Shino check the prisoners for any serious wounds and then let them out. Make it clear that we cannot return them to their homes at this time if they're not from Nami, meet up at the house when you're done. Shikamaru you start in the office and gather up any documents of interest. I'll take the other warehouse and meet you there."

They separated to conduct their own searches. Around them the fires from earlier were still burning and it was creating a thick smoke and the stench of burning bodies was beginning to spread. Asuma entered the other warehouse and started going through its contents looking for anything that was valuable. There was much to be found aside from the narcotics that he would destroy later, but there were a few crates of marketable

goods. The weapons and raw materials they could use. 'We'll come back for these later.'

After dumping the useless crates of drugs into the water Asuma made his way to the house to check up on Shikamaru. Walking on he had to agree with Shino that the house itself was a veritable vault of priceless artifacts and works of art. 'We'll definitely be taking these as well.' There would be more than enough to cover Tazuna's debt to Konoha, and then some. It wasn't forbidden for shinobi to take things from their enemies if they were on a mission, so long as Konoha received a cut of the spoils. He found Shikamaru in Gatō's office going through stacks upon stacks of papers.

"Find anything Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru looked up from the paper he was skimming. "Most of these appear to be business related. Shipping manifests, timetables, investment opportunities, and the like." He gestured to one of the filing cabinets in the corner. "That one has the really juicy stuff. The who, what, when, where, and how of his entire enterprise. His business associates, both legitimate and not. We should definitely take that with us. The rest is pretty much useless to anybody but a member of the Gatō Corporation."

Asuma nodded. "We'll bring it with us anyway and let the Intelligence Division scour the information. You never know." Asuma helped Shikamaru go through the plethora of documents intent on making the people who would go through this mess of works lives' a bit easier. They were eventually joined by Naruto and Shino who told him that most of the people had decided to go back to the city and spread word that Gatō had died. It was a long way back to the city from here and Asuma hoped they didn't encounter any problems along the way. There were still a lot of bandits out there who fled. "Come on we've got to pack all this up. Naruto, I hope you have enough scrolls for this."

They spent the next two hours sealing things into scrolls and making their way back to Tazuna's house. When they finally got back Asuma felt how tired he was. "Good work team. Head on in to sleep. I'll take the watch again." Tazuna would have to be 'sick' again tomorrow as unfortunate as it would be.

I had originally planned on ending this mission in two chapters but each time I worked on it I decided I hated what I had written so scrapped it and started over. Thus, bringing us here where unfortunately I still have one more chapter to write for wave, but I assure it will not be four! Also write is technically not true. This chapter WAS longer and has since been split in half. I'm actually pretty pleased with how this iteration turned out, hence why its being posted. Not much spectacular and eye catching ninja action. One because I really believe they should be much stealthier than they are in the anime and manga. Two, because writing all that combat out would be tiresome and a waste for a bunch of thugs and a handful of samurai. I'd rather spend more time writing the fight with Zabuza than some nameless people I threw in just for them to kill. In this I'm mostly just trying to introduce my take on how things work and make the world a wee bit grittier and darker than the sunshine and rainbows we saw at the end of Shippuden. I haven't really watched Boruto other than the chunin exams cause everybody was freaking out about Naruto dying and I was I like "WHAT? THE PLOT ARMOR FINALLY FAILED?!" If I'm honest I was a little disappointed they didn't commit to the death. I guess spoiler? I don't know if that is technically a spoiler anymore. Anyway. One more wave chapter that is the conclusion. I know, I know. Three chapters? Come on Colonel you don't need three! Evidently I do. Shocked and disappointed me as well. Until next time!

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

A/N: In an effort to better differentiate between thoughts, speech, emphasis, sarcasm, flashbacks, and techniques I am experimenting with some formatting changes. This mostly effects flashbacks which I have not yet decided how they will be formatted moving forward. I might just drop the italics and scream at you that this is a flashback. But I really don't want to. I don't want to have to say this is a flashback and this is the flashback over. I feel like it would interrupt the flow of the read. Not that I think I have good flow now, but I don't know it feels wrong to leave it as it.

One Autumn Leaf. I figured it was you. Glad to see you stuck with it. Yeah, I wrote some fluff, but again I couldn't really not. It was pretty much a fact throughout the entire show Naruto NEVER talked about his life. Everybody knew, but they never talked about it. At least with Naruto around. It's a recurring problem in the show. NOBODY TALKS ABOUT ANYTHING! Kakashi, Naruto, and Sasuke all kept their problems bottled up and look at what happened to them (canonically). Kakashi was an uber depressed person. Naruto was an uber repressed person. Sasuke was an uber Kakashi and Naruto with some anger management issues thrown in. Kakashi wanted to feel miserable all the time. Naruto spent his entire life trying to ignore his own misery. And Sasuke spent his entire life trying to hurt the world as badly as it hurt him. Not one of them ever talked about anything that happened. So yeah, a Naru breakdown. Decades upon decades of not addressing everything that happened (my story now) and letting it all hang out. I don't know about any of you but I don't think a person, ANY person, is capable of not getting upset and emotional. This isn't the same Naruto Inari met, the one who really didn't have anything or anybody except the Hokage and Iruka. This Naruto has had everything he ever wanted and finally found a person he could share his pain with. So I don't care Naru/Shika fluff! *insert Sakura squeal* Plus I just couldn't really write that Naruto brushed it off like last time. We also don't really know what Naruto did other than go out and train himself to exhaustion. Let's all remember what Kakashi said, "I've never once see Naruto cry." That doesn't mean Naruto *didn't* cry, just that nobody ever saw if he did. I think I'm trying too hard to justify my fluff lol. As for Asuma's reaction yeah it was pretty tame, but then Asuma is supposed to be this bad ass jōnin that's been on dozens upon dozens of missions and fought in a war where he no doubt killed people. They had to learn to accept death. There is a difference between acceptance and ignorance. But then I also said Naruto doesn't ever address his problems. Hmmm. Wonder what that might mean. And yes Asuma isn't Kakashi level of suspicious/curious but he's definitely suspicious/curious. As you said he's just a more laid-back kind of guy. Now the killing part. I was a little torn between how I wanted to write how they killed people. In the real world a lot is done to dehumanize your opponents. To make the act of killing them easier. I tried to write in such a way that they seemed detached to the concept. That it was something that had to be done and they didn't have time to question it then and there. Whether they question it in the future we'll have to see. The only S-Rankers being Akatsuki thing, I don't really know if they're the only S-Rankers around but I imagine Pein/Nagato isn't going to let a bunch of people capable of threatening his plans walk around freely. So if they refuse to join I imagine he tries to eliminate them. I'm sure there are others out there, but its gonna be much easier to find a way to hire the Akatsuki then hire somebody else. And yes updates are coming a bit faster right now.

xXSakuraBlossomsXx. Huh that's really weird. I thought for sure somebody would go after Gatō before Zabuza or Gatō could act. I mean to me it makes perfect sense to go after Gatō. He controls everything in Wave. He indirectly controls Zabuza. If Gatō isn't around to pay Zabuza, Zabuza has no reason to fight them.

TigrezzTail. I may not be the best writer out there, but I feel like I can do the drama parts pretty damn well. If only the rest was as good or not annoying.

Great news! I still don't own Naruto. The legacy is safe.

"Blah blah blah" – Speech

'Blah blah blah' – Thought

"Blah blah blah" – Summon/Bijū speech

'Blah blah blah' – Summon/Bijū thought

Moku Bunshin no Jutsu (Wood Clone Technique) – Technique

? – Flashback

"When you see a 'word' like this, think air quotes or sarcasm!"

"If you see a *word* like this than it's for emphasis. *EMPHASIS!*"

P.S. If you get my little emphasis reference than virtual high five!

Chapter 10 – Wave Part 3

"You've recovered nicely." The soft quiet voice echoed throughout the room. Haku was watching intently as Zabuza tested his muscles. He was astounded at Zabuza's ability to recover from his death-like state and wondered just how much of it was actually Zabuza's stubbornness.

Zabuza cackled. "I have you to thank for that Haku. I knew I struck gold when I took you with me." Taking Haku had been the best decision Zabuza made on his way out of Mizu no Kuni (Land of Water). The discovery of Haku's bloodline only solidified Zabuza's belief that the boy was useful. It also gave Zabuza a convenient way to dismiss that he had taken Haku with him on a whim and the feeling of abandonment the both felt. He was not attached to the boy at all. "Did you find out anything about our new friends?"

Haku ever the one to please his master smiled sweetly. "Of course Zabuza-sama. The leader is Sarutobi Asuma, the son of the Sandaime Hokage, a former member of the Shugonin Jūnishi (Guardian Shinobi Twelve), and presently an elite jōnin in Konoha. He prefers to fight with his trench knives and is primarily listed as a Fūton user." Haku wasn't able to gather much information. There's only so much he could do in an isolated country like this. "It was also noted that he was quite adept at katon techniques." The last piece of information that would likely capture his master's attention was the price on his head. "There is a bounty on him totaling 30 million ryō."

Zabuza was listening as he kept stretching and flexing his muscles. So far what Haku was telling him wasn't anything he didn't know from their

fight. That was fine with him. The only reason he had Haku do any digging at all was to make sure there'd be no surprises. When he heard the size of the man's bounty though he couldn't help but whistle. "That would be a nice paycheck." Especially since Gatō was dead and unable to pay him. Zabuza was confident he could beat the man and therefore assumed Asuma had pissed somebody off back in the day and that's why the bounty was so high. "What of the brats?"

Haku frowned. He hadn't been able to find out much about them. They were too inexperienced. Too new to have attracted the attention of anybody. "Not a lot. The only real piece of information I could confirm is that the heads of the Nara and Aburame clans both have sons that would be about the age of our opponents. As for the blonde child, there is even less about him at least from the brokers I had time to seek out."

Zabuza hummed. It was as he suspected. He had a pretty good idea who the blonde was and wasn't as bothered by there being nothing known about him. If his instincts were right, then Konoha would have done whatever they could to keep a lid on it. "The Nara will hide in or near shadows to augment their jutsu. They won't be the most physically capable of the bunch so getting in close is the best option, however be careful of the shadows. One touch is all they need. As for the Aburame their insects will drain you dry if you aren't paying attention. Also, shouldn't be too physically capable instead preferring to rely on their insects for combat. The blonde will be the heavy hitter of the group. His ability to make clones essentially makes him a one-man army, his stamina likely outpaces both of us. A prolonged confrontation with them is not to our benefit."

"I understand Zabuza-sama." Haku would strike quickly to incapacitate them. The only person who had to die was Asuma. If necessary, he would kill his heart if it meant saving Zabuza. "Just leave the genin to me."

"Good then let's go. Sarutobi's head is valuable, as is time." Haku had told him that Gatō was dead. Meaning Zabuza wasn't going to get paid. He had wasted so much time in this backwater country and gained nothing for it. The longer he was here the better the chances of the Hunters finding them. Fate seemed to be smiling down on him offering a man like Sarutobi Asuma up on a silver platter. If he was right about the blonde, then he had even more opportunity to profit. He'd just have Haku kill the other two. They weren't worth the trouble of trying to ransom. Konoha wouldn't stand for what he was about to do.

Today was supposed to be a good day for Asuma, he felt so sure that after they killed Gatō things would calm down. They had somehow managed to rest the entirety of yesterday with no incidents. Yet now he felt more uneasy than he had the entire time they were here. They had eliminated any reason for Zabuza to fight them again. All they had to do now was finish the bridge, renegotiate the terms of the contract, and go home. 'Easy.'

The team was waiting for Tazuna to be ready before they left. There was no reason to split the team anymore. Since the assault on Gatō's residence and the massive fight anybody who wasn't dead had run away. This drastically reduced the overall risk and threat of this mission. Nevertheless, Asuma still had this feeling in his gut that something was wrong.

Asuma had been feeling uneasy all morning. Everything seemed normal but that didn't eliminate the creeping feeling of dread that was permeating his thoughts. "All three of you will be going to the bridge with me today." With Gatō gone and his goons scattered there was no reason to split the team any longer.

"Problem sensei?" Shikamaru asked as he was lazing on the couch waiting for Tazuna to be ready to leave. Naruto had been quiet since his little breakdown and their attack on Gatō the other night and Shikamaru was still worried about him. He seemed fine, but Naruto always seemed fine. The best thing he could do was just be nearby for him. He yawned and laid his head down on Naruto's leg intent on using it as a pillow. 'Naruto's thighs make excellent pillows.'

Naruto was fighting a very different battle. One against his hormones. 'Why Shika...why?' Shikamaru's taunt from the other day was all that kept running through Naruto's mind. He didn't know if it was just Shikamaru teasing or making a legitimate pass at him, but his mind was consumed with those thoughts. It made situations like this difficult. *'Just think about Kaguya, just think about Kaguya, just think about Kaguya.'* He kept repeating that mantra in his mind hoping to avoid any embarrassing situations from developing.

Still it was a welcome distraction from his tormented thoughts. Naruto had killed more people in the last few days than he had the entirety of his past life. He felt their deaths were necessary or unavoidable but that didn't help him reconcile his feelings. All he could think about were the ones the people he killed left behind. They were certainly sons, but had they been fathers? Brothers? Husbands? They chose a violent life and met a violent end but that didn't change any of the way he felt.

Asuma was watching the interaction between the two without comment. Shikamaru looked perfectly relaxed and comfortable. Naruto looked focused on not panicking. It was amusing to Asuma. He focused back on the question instead of their behavior. "I don't know. Things just feel off."

Shino also saw Naruto's distress and rolled his eyes at his friends. He just thought they should rip the bandage off so to speak. It was hard enough being a teenager once, being one again when you know there's a person that's yours right next to you must be unbearable. Shikamaru had fallen asleep much to Shino's astonishment. *'I do not see how the Nara clan can sleep so much. Just thinking about how much a Nara sleeps exhausts me.'* Shino had never been happier about not having been in a relationship than he was now. "Should one of us not stay with Tazuna-san's family if you are this concerned sensei?"

"I'd rather have all three of you with me at the bridge. With Gatō and his goons gone the risk to them has gone down drastically." Asuma couldn't be sure it was Zabuza that was making him feel uneasy but all the more reason to keep his team close. He didn't want to risk anyone on his team coming across Zabuza alone. Even if Tazuna's family was targeted they were only useful alive so the overall risk was lower in comparison to Tazuna.

Tazuna announced that he was ready to go so Asuma kicked the couch below where Shikamaru was sleeping, just enough to jostle the kid awake. "Time to get up lazy." Asuma watched as Naruto sighed in relief as soon as Shikamaru's head left his thigh. *'Poor kid.'* He had the group form up around Tazuna as they left for the bridge. Asuma kept glancing around expecting the very shadows to rise up and attack him right now.

They were nearing the bridge and when Asuma saw the thick fog that seemed to hover over the bridge and surrounding area he cursed himself for being right. *'It would be the day before our support is expected back. Fuck you Kakashi and your damn curse.'* Once they could actually see onto the bridge they saw all of Tazuna's workers lying on the ground, seemingly alive, but it was hard to tell from a distance.

"Sensei..." Naruto began but he was cut off by Asuma.

"I know Naruto." The group surrounded Tazuna as they heard a deep chuckling from the fog.

"Hello again Sarutobi Asuma. I do so hope you're willing to dance more." Zabuza and Haku walked out of the mist so the Konoha group could see them. "I see you brought all the brats too, that makes things a bit easier for me. Haku deal with them." Zabuza chuckled. "This will be fun." He made the seals for the **Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Jutsu)** to make the mist even thicker before slipping back into it.

Asuma leapt forward a bit from the group. Just as soon as he did he frowned as both Zabuza and Haku disappeared back into the mist. *'Damn. There's way too much for me to blow away or evaporate with fire.'* Asuma calmed himself and tried to think where Zabuza would strike first. He cursed himself again for his preemptive positioning realizing Zabuza would go after the weakest opponents first to prevent any annoyances. Asuma turned around and was about to charge back when a massive sword nearly cleaved his head off.

"A wise decision trying to get back to your brats," Zabuza yanked the sword back up, "however you're worth far more than them, except maybe the blonde. I wonder about his lineage." Seeing Asuma tense slightly at the implication all but confirmed it for Zabuza. *'So the Yondaime Hokage had a son. Konoha has done an excellent job of keeping that secret. A pity they decided to send him outside the village. Just knowledge of him will be worth a fortune.'* Zabuza was smiling just thinking of the payout he could expect. "Had I known about your bounty the first time I wouldn't have retreated." He swung the blade in a wide arc intent to cleave Asuma in two. He smirked when Asuma predictably jumped up to avoid the horizontal slash before Zabuza altered its trajectory mid-swing. Zabuza was a bit disappointed that things were going to end so soon until his sword made contact and the Asuma in front of him collapsed into a pile of rocks. "Oh good I thought this might be boring."

Asuma cursed again having barely had time to switch with the clone he made. "I don't suppose we can avoid fighting?" His question was met with silence. "I didn't think so." The mist made it difficult for Asuma to track Zabuza much to his great regret and annoyance. His senses weren't honed like Kakashi's, so he couldn't hear Zabuza's approach until the attacks were much closer. He didn't think it would work but he didn't have much choice. Asuma gathered as much chakra as he could manage in his mouth. **"Fūton: Daitoppa (Wind Style: Great Breakthrough)!"** The concentrated wind stream shot from his mouth as he tried to blast the mist away. There was a momentary shift as his visibility improved before the mist rolled back in.

Zabuza barked at him. "A valiant effort, but I'm afraid it wasn't enough. This island's natural climate only makes my mist more powerful." It was a boon to him that he found work here. Everything suited his fighting style. The abundance of water. The thick fog. It was a Silent Killer's dream. "I haven't felt this excited in years! You may not be as much fun as some of my previous opponents," Zabuza started laughing madly, "but you're definitely the toughest opponent I've faced in months! Come then Sarutobi Asuma show me why you're worth 30 million ryō!" Zabuza began appearing in and out of the mist to take swings at Asuma or exchange blows with him before retreating back into the mist.

While Asuma was cursing his luck at having to fight Zabuza alone and unable to see, Naruto Shikamaru, and Shino were 'fighting' Haku. "Please surrender. I have no desire to hurt any of you." Despite being trained by Zabuza, Haku truly hated hurting people. So long as Zabuza got what he wanted these two didn't have to die and the blonde wouldn't have to watch.

"Sorry not going to happen." Naruto knew Haku's capabilities, so they had the upper hand. Not to mention his Yōton could melt through Haku's Hyōton. This was not a battle Haku could win this time around. **"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Shadow Clone Technique)!"** Five Naruto clones appeared next to Tazuna. "Ne, oji-san stay put just like last time, will you?"

The clones formed a pentagonal perimeter around Tazuna and placed intricately designed tags on the ground at their feet. The clones clapped their hands together as they channeled their chakra and watched as the barrier rose around them. **Saisei Kekkai (Self-Repairing Barrier)**. The air around the barrier seemed to shimmer and for Naruto who was close to it he could tell it was working. *'It never ceases to amaze me how uncomfortable that feeling is.'* There were very few things that could completely block out his ability to sense anything, but this barrier was one of those. Naruto only created a handful of layers that would keep Tazuna safe should he inevitably become a target.

"A very impressive barrier. However, since you are not inside it I only need to neutralize you and it will fall. You also assume our target is the bridge builder. We are well aware Gatō has died. If you don't want your friends to be harmed, you will surrender to me." In Haku's hand appeared three senbon that he threw at Naruto with blinding speed. "Zabuza-sama's victory is inevitable. Please do not make me fight you."

"You are the one forcing this confrontation." Shino was already letting his insects loose to swarm Haku. His insects were vulnerable to the ice but the longer they fought the more resilient they would become. One of the many benefits of a kikaichū hive. His thoughts were focused on why they were fighting if they knew Gatō was gone. There was only one possibility that could be entertained. One of them was a valuable target. The only one in the group who could possibly fit the bill was Asuma. "We may be forced to kill them Naruto-san." If it came down to Asuma or them, Shino's choice would be obvious.

Haku was saddened by the statement. "If you will not stand down then I shall force you to." Haku had created several water clones earlier that now appeared around the genin and engaged them in close quarters battle. The clones were all armed with senbon. Haku didn't expect to win with clones but from what Zabuza told him he had no choice but to go all out from the beginning if they came to blows, and he needed water for his best attacks.

They collectively made quick work of the clones which is exactly what Haku wanted to happen. "I'm afraid you have already lost." The field had been set. All he had left to do was follow through. He crossed his middle fingers over his index fingers. **"Makyō Hyōshō (Demonic Mirroring Ice Crystals)."** 21 identical mirrors of ice formed a dome around the trio and Haku quickly stepped into the closest one. His image was reflected across each of the mirrors.

Naruto pretended to act surprised. "A Kekkai Genkai. Hyōton if I had to guess. Very impressive, and a very impressive jutsu."

"Yes. This is my most powerful technique and one you cannot hope to escape. I am sorry." Haku pulled readied more senbon and unleashed them upon the genin as he jumped from mirror to mirror at speeds that were impossible to follow. To Haku's surprise the trio were doing an adequate job avoiding the senbon and were working together to cover each other making it harder for Haku to target one of them individually. Nevertheless, the speed at which Haku could move within his mirrors was overwhelming and steadily wearing them down. Haku couldn't let up lest he waste precious time with this technique. The speed at which he was moving distorted his hearing, so he was missing the conversation happening between his targets.

"How much longer do we have to keep this up Naruto?" Shikamaru was getting tired of being pelted with senbon. No matter how good they were they couldn't keep up with Haku. He didn't think he could keep up with Haku had he still been older.

Naruto was trying to intercept as many of the hits as he could. He would heal from the injuries far quicker than Shikamaru or Shino and wanted to spare them any unnecessary pain. "I don't know. I mean we can always knock Haku out, but you were the one who suggested this Shika."

Shikamaru groaned as he pulled another senbon out of his leg. It was getting harder and harder to dodge. "I didn't think it'd be like this!" Naruto had told them what he knew of Haku's techniques, but this didn't compare to the story Naruto told. It was far more terrifying and impressive. "Besides you know as well as I do that the plan changed the moment we moved against Gatō before Zabuza acted." Eliminating Gatō unintentionally had thrown a whole wrench into their plan. They had been too optimistic that Zabuza and Haku wouldn't attack again. They robbed the man of his paycheck. They should have known Zabuza would try to recoup his losses.

Shino had been sending his insects to rest on the outside of the mirror dome and drain the chakra from them. It was a slow process so as to not make it more noticeable for Haku who might rapidly drop the temperature around his insects and freeze them. "My kikaichū are working, albeit very slowly, as per the original plan Shikamaru-san. I am close to being able to breed a resilient subspecies but without the ability to focus solely on that the adaptation will be slow." He needed absolute focus to breed an entirely new colony with a resistance to ice, something he wouldn't be able to do right now. The insects themselves would slowly adapt with knowledge learned from other members of the hive, but that could take days or weeks to affect the entire hive.

Shikamaru nodded and ducked under another slew of senbon that almost hit his neck. "I only hope Asuma is alright." Asuma was good, and Shikamaru believed Asuma was great. But Zabuza was just as good if not a tiny bit better. It made him worry about his sensei.

Asuma's fight against Zabuza was going well...for Zabuza. Every time Asuma tried to get himself pushed back toward the genin Zabuza was there to force him further away. He simply couldn't keep up against Zabuza in the mist and had no way to get rid of it. His left arm was bleeding from where Zabuza's sword had shaved some of his skin off. Had the hit been any deeper Asuma may have lost the entire forearm. He wanted nothing more than to light up a cigarette and enjoy his final moments, but he couldn't with Zabuza breathing down his neck constantly.

Zabuza was a little disappointed. The first fight had been much more even than this. He chalked it up to the low visibility. It made sense to him. He hadn't used the **Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Technique)** last time. This time he had dropped the visibility to no more than a few meters, which wasn't a problem for him. He could hear Asuma's labored breathing and the faint beating of his heart. His opponent lacked such finely tuned senses. It made the fight boring but there was too much riding on this now to even it up. "I must say I'm disappointed Sarutobi."

Asuma unknowingly had his back to Zabuza who was calculating the best way to kill the man before he had a chance to react. "I wish I could say sorry."

Zabuza created a **Mizu Bunshin (Water Clone)** and sent it to fight against Asuma. He had yet to use clones this fight and planned to capitalize on the brief distraction.

Asuma saw Zabuza charging him from out of the mist with his zanbatō raised above him with one arm. He dodged backward a bit to give him more time to block the coming swing with his trench knives and not give under the pressure as he had done before. When the sword hit it didn't carry with it the same strength as it did before and caused some distress for Asuma. 'A clone, it has to be!' He felt a gust of wind and heard a loud clanging of metal behind him.

"Things don't seem to be going your way Asuma." Raidō and Aoba were standing behind Asuma using their swords to push back against Zabuza's massive one.

Aoba was gritting his teeth against the sheer strength Zabuza was putting into the blade. "Granted I don't really blame you given your up against the Kirigakure no Kijin."

Zabuza growled in annoyance. "Great more tree huggers! I don't suppose either of you have fat bounties on your head?" Not that he expected an answer. Contrary to popular belief not every shinobi gets added to the bingo book. The really exceptional ones that are smart never find their names there. The dumber ones show off too much and are added with overinflated bounties depending on the humiliation the offended party suffered.

Asuma sighed in relief. "Glad you two could make it." Though he wasn't expecting them for another day, not that he was going to complain too loudly. "I could really use the help here."

Raidō and Aoba disengaged from Zabuza once Asuma righted himself. "You don't say? We never would've guessed." Raidō was a little annoyed that he had sent both Genma and Hayate back when really only one would have been enough to get them both there, but he had wanted to be sure there were no mishaps. *'What I wouldn't give for Hayate to be here.'* The man was easily the best swordsmen in the village. "What's the plan Asuma?"

"Back to back, and we exhaust him. Swinging that sword around the way he is has to take a lot. As long as we watch each other's backs we'll pull through." It wasn't an ideal plan, but he knew that between the three of them they still couldn't remove the mist without completely exhausting themselves. If Raido had been proficient in Fūton or Katon techniques then maybe, but the man preferred his Suiton and kenjutsu techniques.

"Not your usual style Asuma, you tired?" As much as it sounded like Raidō was mimicking Genma he was legitimately concerned that Asuma might be too tired to go on the offensive.

Asuma sighed. "Yes I am. That sword of his is no joke." Fighting against in better conditions had been difficult, but with Zabuza having the clear advantage here it was even more difficult.

Zabuza had been waiting patiently, trying to gleam whatever insight he could from these new interlopers. "If you're done with your little strategy meeting we can get back to our fun." The odds had shifted against him slightly, but he still had the advantage so long as the mist remained. In the mist he was everywhere and nowhere. This mist was capable of driving hardened veterans mad with paranoia.

Naruto let out another grunt as more senbon had hit him. "Would you stop with the damn needles already!" He was in the process of fruitlessly throwing the senbon back at the nearest mirror. Naruto had gotten fed up with playing pincushion. "Change of plans Shika."

"Right then. Shino speed it up." Shikamaru had never been happier to be able to get to work on something. *'Whoever created senbon deserves to be punished. Painfully. I'm thinking a lifetime of being pricked by one.'* He wouldn't be surprised if he developed needle phobia after all of this. *'Why did I suggest a slow approach to this?'*

Haku was getting tired and was no longer hurling himself from mirror to mirror so he heard what Shikamaru said but had no context. He was very confused as well. Having used this jutsu numerous times even at the speeds he had been going he should not be as tired as he feels. His mirrors were using an exorbitant amount of chakra in comparison to their usual rate. Realization dawned on him. "I see. Those insects of yours eat chakra and you're using them to drain the chakra from my mirrors. A good plan." Unfortunately, that meant Haku could no longer hold back. "I cannot allow you to interfere in Zabuza-sama's plans. Please forgive me."

There was still water all over the ground and Haku was dangerous with water. He hadn't used this technique since the night his father came for him. "**Hissatsu Hyōsō (Certain-Kill Ice Spears)**." From the puddles of water shot up eight spears of solid ice that jutted out in multiple directions quickly. *'I am very sorry.'*

The suddenness of the technique surprised everyone and Haku watched as the Nara was unable to avoid the brunt of the attack with it appearing right beneath him. The blonde didn't get out of the way either, but he seemingly ignored the gaping wound in his leg. Much to Haku's surprise he saw the wound was already closing. The Aburame had at some point replaced himself with a clone made of insects and disappeared from Haku's sight.

All Naruto saw was red fly from the direction of Shikamaru as a giant spear of ice shot up from the ground. He paled as he saw the spike take a chunk of Shikamaru's flesh with it before forcing him away. To his horror more protrusions began to jut out from the rising spike and one impaled Shikamaru severing the femoral artery in his left leg. "SHIKA!"

Naruto's heart was racing as he ran over to Shikamaru as fear gripped him. *'Not again. Not again! Please not again!'* Naruto dropped to his knees as soon as he was next to Shikamaru and frantically looked at the wound. *'Okay. Okay. It's bad, but it didn't hit anything important.'* He looked down at the artery. *'Except the leg that's spraying blood idiot!'* Naruto calmed himself as best he could and unsealed an emergency first aid kit from his vest and started bandaging the wounds to stop the bleeding.

"KURAMA! KURAMA YOU BIG DUMB FOX WAKE UP!" Naruto started shouting in his head. He didn't know any medical ninjutsu. There was never much point in learning since his injuries always healed quickly. He cursed himself for not picking up even a few extra things.

"**What do you want kit?**" Kurama had been having a restful nap dreaming of the few short days he got to enjoy with his father and siblings. He noticed the distressed look on Naruto's face. "**What's happened?**"

Naruto was near tears at seeing Shikamaru hurt. "Shika! He's...he's hurt. Really bad." His own thoughts were tearing into him again for letting somebody he cares about be hurt because he wanted to help others. First, he lets Sasuke destroy the village. Now he lets Haku hurt Shikamaru.

"**Calm down Naruto!**" Kurama didn't share the same attachment Naruto did to the lives of others, but Naruto was the first person to ever befriend him, so he would do his best to keep his host calm and happy. "**You have yet to unlock the seal so the assistance I can provide is limited, but you do not need me to tell you to channel my chakra into his body. Why do you hesitate?**" Kurama knew that Naruto knew this, so the only question was why he wasn't already doing it.

"I'm scared Kurama...your chakra...it hurt before I unlocked the seal. What if it hurts him more?" He couldn't bring himself to hurt Shikamaru like he remembered being hurt even if it meant saving him. The feeling of having your flesh regenerate was not pleasant, and it burned. A lot. Like being dumped in a vat of acid. To say nothing of the feeling of having your entire feel as if its being burned from within because of the potency of such dense chakra.

Kurama chuckled. "**I guess I never told you. My chakra was only so volatile because you kept taking and taking from me as if it was yours. We bijū can choose whether our chakra is destructive or not, to a certain extent. Think back to when you first stole my chakra. The wood created by that Yamato responded with budding new life. I promise it will not hurt him kit.**"

Naruto gave the giant chakra construct a hopeful smile. "Really?" Seeing the massive head nod Naruto sighed and a few tears escaped his eyes. "Thank Kami!" Naruto started pulling on the slow trickle of Kurama's chakra that the seal would allow before placing one hand on Shikamaru's bleed thigh and the wound on his chest and forcing his and Kurama's chakra into him. *'Thank you Kurama.'*

Haku and everybody else felt the change in the air as Naruto started using some of the Kyūbi's chakra. Haku didn't have any firsthand knowledge of the bijū so was unfamiliar with the incredibly uncomfortable feeling radiating off the blonde. *'What is this feeling?'* He watched as chakra visibly began to swirl around Naruto. *'Impossible! Chakra cannot be visible like that!'* He knew it was possible for chakra to have a physical presence but never as pure energy as he was witnessing here. The power he was seeing was oppressive and hot. It felt as if his body was suddenly engulfed in a twisting torrent of fire. Haku jumped back until the feeling became less oppressive.

Haku was mystified as he continued to watch the blonde with interest as his body underwent subtle signs of change. Haku noticed how Naruto's teeth and nails had grown longer and looked deadly. The scars spanning Naruto's face had grown darker and thicker. *'Not scars then. A kekkaï genkai perhaps?'* He had never heard of an ability like the one Naruto was exhibiting, but that didn't preclude the possibility. Haku had once heard of a clan that was able to use its bones as weapons.

Naruto kept his focus solely on Shikamaru until he was certain the wounds had closed, and the bleeding stopped. He peeled the bandages on Shikamaru's flank back to see a raw patch of new skin slightly discolored from the rest of Shikamaru's body. *'The tissue will repair itself with time.'* Now that Shikamaru was out of danger Naruto created three clones to watch over him before scanning the bridge for Haku.

Naruto grit his teeth and unconsciously cut open his own lip with his teeth. He could have lost Shikamaru because of his desire to save somebody. Had almost lost the most important person in his world because he wanted to give somebody a chance for a better life. He had sworn that he wouldn't let a situation like Sasuke happen again, and yet he had almost allowed Haku to kill Shikamaru. He was angry at Haku and himself, but more at himself. *'How many times do I have to learn a lesson?'*

Naruto glared angrily at Haku as he covered himself from head to toe in lava. "You hurt Shika." He couldn't see behind Haku's mask which only helped him ignore the feeling that he knew that Haku never wanted to hurt anybody. He was angry and only wanted to hit something right now, and Haku had hurt *his* Shikamaru. "I won't let anybody hurt him!" He charged headfirst at Haku leaving dots of lava behind with each step he took.

Haku created a series of walls in front of him in an attempt to slow and eventually contain the now angry Naruto. "**Hyōton: Tajū Hyōheki (Ice Style: Multiple Ice Wall)**!" A series of walls made of ice rose up from the surface of the bridge between Haku and Naruto. The walls did not deter Naruto in the slightest who merely crashed into them and started to melt his way through. One by one the walls dissolved from the intense heat until there was only one left. Having no other option Haku channeled the last of his chakra to form his strongest shield. "**Hyōton: Hyōgan Dōmu**

(Ice Style: Ice Rock Dome of Magnificent Nothingness)!" A large dome of Ice surrounded and encased Haku just as the last wall dissolved.

Naruto briefly looked up at the dome before he ignored it and put his hands against the cold surface and pushed more chakra to his hands. The ice before him was already starting to melt and Naruto knew it was only a matter of time before he could reach Haku. His eyes were locked on the still masked Haku. Anytime Haku flinched in a direction Naruto was ready to pounce.

Haku winced as he took in the sight of Naruto's eyes. The unbridled fury that rested in them. The barely contained rage that wanted to lash out at him. *'All because I tried to take his precious person from him.'* Haku was pulling chakra from the other sections of the dome to the spot Naruto was focusing on to try and reinforce it. Haku wondered what it would be like for somebody to feel these things for him. *'Forgive me Zabuza-sama, but I cannot defeat this child.'* Eventually Haku's chakra ran out and the dome shattered into thousands of tiny shards of ice. He collapsed panting onto the ground with absolutely nothing left to give.

Haku watched as Naruto stalked forward to stand over him. He watched as Naruto started channeling chakra to his hands and stared as the lava coating his body started moving toward the swirling ball of energy that was forming in his hand. Eventually the ball of energy was replaced with a swirling ball of lava that was growing in size rapidly. When it stopped growing, Haku prepared himself for the end. *'This is the end for me Zabuza-sama, was I useful?'*

Haku watched as Naruto started to thrust his hand downward at him. He could feel the heat radiating off the ball and it was intense. Far more intense than the other power he had felt. Moments before the ball would connect with his stomach a hand shot out and grabbed Naruto's wrist stopping him in his tracks.

"Let go Shino!" Naruto didn't take his eyes off Haku as he ordered Shino to let him go.

Shino gripped his friend's wrist harder in reply. "No. He is defeated and no longer a threat."

"I don't care! He hurt Shika!" Naruto would never allow anybody to take Shikamaru away from him. Not anybody.

Shino released a significant portion of his swarm and directed them to start draining Naruto's chakra. He wouldn't be able to completely drain Naruto, but he could do enough to slow him down. "I will not allow you to kill him Naruto-san." Shino knew that Naruto and Sasuke were more similar than anybody liked to admit. "I will not allow you to become like *him*. If that means I have to fight you then so be it." To prove his point Shino allowed the rest of his insects out of his body and began forming several **Mushi Bunshin (Insect Clone)** around Naruto.

Naruto ignored the insects draining his chakra. It would be hours before he felt their effect. Blinded by his own anger didn't understand where Shino was going. "Him who?" He just kept glaring at Haku.

"*Him*." Shino stressed it again. "He who was so consumed by his grief and pain that he wanted nothing more than to punish anybody and everybody who he felt wronged him or his family. I will not allow you to become like him Naruto-san. If Shikamaru-san were conscious he would do the same as I am now." Shino sighed as Naruto gave no indication of giving up. "Shikamaru-san is alive. I am alive. You are alive. Your opponent is out of chakra and unable to move any longer. Killing him now would make you no better than *him*. You will have succumbed to your own anger and become that which you fear most."

Naruto looked back at Shikamaru. He showed no sign of giving in, but neither was he pressing his attack. Still, Shino was worried Naruto wouldn't listen to him and they would end up fighting. "Do not let fear and anger cloud your judgement Naruto-san. It is one thing to eliminate a threat in the midst of combat but the moment your opponent is down they have lost. To kill at that moment is wrong."

Naruto looked back down at Haku. "Then how do you justify the other lives we've taken? I hardly think Gatō's army was any threat to us." Earlier this week they had killed hundreds of people simply for being in the employ of Gatō. Not a single one had been a threat by themselves. It was only thanks to their numbers that they could be called that. Still they had killed many of them.

"As I said we were in combat. We also know for a fact that had we not killed them they would have gone on to cause greater suffering to others. Suffering that would ultimately fall upon us as our failure to act." Shino had no qualms about killing people like they had done the day before yesterday. Everybody makes choices in life and has to live with the consequences of those choices. They had chosen to become kidnappers, rapists, murderers, and the like, or at the very least they chose to stay around those who were. He had simply chosen to prevent them from causing anymore suffering.

Naruto stilled. "But Shika got hurt!" It was obvious that Naruto was blaming himself for Shikamaru's injuries. "And it's all my fault!" Naruto whispered.

Shino shook his head but kept his grip firmly on his friend's wrist. "No. It was nobody's fault. We are shinobi Naruto-san. Do you expect to be able to prevent Shikamaru from ever getting injured?" Injuries were inevitable in their line of work. Thinking you can go through life unscathed as a shinobi is absurd. Shino watched as the swirling ball of energy slowly dissipated just before Asuma arrived.

Asuma appeared next to them. A frantic look on his face. "Are you both alright?" He could feel the tension between the two of them despite the fact that their opponent was unconscious on the ground. Asuma took special note of how Shino was holding Naruto who appeared to have been mid-strike.

Shino looked past the spikey blonde locks obstructing his view of Asuma. "We are relatively unharmed, but Shikamaru-san is injured."

Asuma was concerned. The moment he had felt the surge of that dreadful chakra he extracted himself from the fight with Zabuza to get to Naruto. Jiraiya had given all the jōnin that Naruto might come in contact with a chakra suppressing seal in the event it ever seemed like the seal might be breaking. He was holding it tight in his hand but upon reaching his students realized things were alright. "I'm better seeing you're both alright." At least what counts as alright for shinobi. "Where's Shikamaru?"

Naruto pointed to where he left his clones. "He's over there." He felt a little guilty at how he had behaved but his fear of losing Shikamaru overrode that guilt. Nobody was worth more than Shikamaru in his mind.

Asuma looked where Naruto pointed and saw the last member of his team standing not moving as he lay on the ground. "Is he alright?"

Naruto shook his head no. "No, but his wounds have been taken care of, so he's not in danger of dying."

Asuma sighed. "Great." He was naturally curious at what Naruto did to patch Shikamaru up so quickly, but that was a question for another time. Right now he'd would take whatever he could get in the way of good news. "I have to get back to Zabuza and the others. Will you two be alright?" Asuma waited for Naruto to nod before he took off back where he heard Raidō and Aoba fighting. As he was running back toward his comrades he called over his shoulder, "If you can deal with this mist Naruto it'd be very helpful." He may not have had enough chakra to do it, but Naruto definitely did.

Naruto watched as Asuma ran off. He could tell the man was nearing his limit. Fighting against Zabuza in favorable conditions had been hard for him, and Zabuza had had the upper hand the entirety of this encounter if Naruto had to guess. Even with the support of two jōnin they might still lose.

Naruto's original hope of bringing Zabuza and Haku to Konoha wasn't going to work. As strong of an argument he could make about bringing them they had realized they'd need the support of the jōnin squad leader, in this case Asuma. Naruto didn't see that happening. He was also still angry at Haku. He understood him, but that didn't make it better.

Naruto realized after what had happened that he was very possessive. They may have fought through a war but there were only a handful of times he felt fear that his friends might die. If he had been on any other team and not this mission he feared that Shikamaru might have died. Of course if he hadn't been on this mission then they probably would have turned back as soon as they encountered the Oni Kyodai. It was *his* decision to continue. A decision that Shikamaru and Shino supported. It was *his* idea to try to get Zabuza and Haku to go to Konoha. Something they also supported. *'Are all my ideas terrible?'*

Naruto looked back at Shikamaru. Naruto knew he was in pain. Even if Kurama wasn't making his chakra toxic the feeling of having a part of you reform was painful and left the area tender. In all they had been through Naruto never felt responsible for his friend's injuries before this moment. "I'm sorry." He whispered in the direction of Shikamaru.

Shino was both standing guard over Haku and protecting him from Naruto. His hand was still firmly locked onto Naruto's wrist, but he knew full well Naruto could break free if he really wanted to.

As if reading Shino's thoughts Naruto reassured him he was fine. "You can relax Shino. I'm not going to kill him anymore. You're right of course. I was acting like Sasuke. I'm sorry." Naruto turned his head away from Shino. Admitting he was wrong had always been a difficult thing for him. When nobody believes in or supports you, you learn to believe in yourself and all your decisions.

"Think nothing more of it Naruto-san. Neither I nor Shikamaru will let you walk down that road again." Once Naruto briefly entertained the opposite path than the one he ultimately walked. Shino had no desire to see him go back there. He relaxed his grip on Naruto and removed his hand but left his **Mushi Bunshin (Insect Clone)** in place.

"Thanks Shino." He never imagined he and Shino would have become friends the way they are. Shino is quiet. He is loud. Shino is meticulous. Naruto is inexact. They were polar opposites and yet they were friends. "I see you aren't wholly convinced though." Naruto was referring to the clones still around Haku.

"We are shinobi. We lie. Even those we trust if necessary." Shino would never assume he had the advantageous position if he was not certain. He was not certain Naruto wouldn't attack Haku, so he kept his clones prepared.

Looking down at Haku Naruto finally let his guilt take over. Haku was fighting for his precious person just as he had fought for Shikamaru. Even if Zabuza was the one forcing this confrontation Haku would do anything for the man. Naruto couldn't see him refusing to do anything Shikamaru wanted, but he also knew Shikamaru wouldn't betray the trust they shared. Getting them to safety in Konoha was out, but at least maybe he could let Haku learn that Zabuza cares about him as more than just a tool. "I have a plan Shino."

Asuma arrived back at the fight in time to try and hit Zabuza from behind. Much to his annoyance Zabuza continued to swing the oversized zanbatō around until it became a shield for his back. *'Damn it!'*

Zabuza looked over his shoulder to see Asuma there. "Taking me from behind. A good strategy, but not very nice." Zabuza wagged one of his fingers that was holding the hilt of his blade. "Naughty, naughty."

"Everything alright Asuma?" Aoba had momentarily frozen at feeling that chakra in the air once more before his preservation instinct overrode his fear and he narrowly avoid being cleaved in two by Zabuza. When Asuma split he hadn't bat an eye figuring the man had a plan for such an eventuality.

"Things are as good as can be expected." Which wasn't great. Even with three of them Zabuza still had the advantage. The fact that they couldn't see him in the mist until he was too close to react other than defending or dodging made things difficult. Add on top of that the man's status as one of the most skilled swordsmen alive and they were easily outclassed in close combat. "The fake hunter is down, now we need to finish our part."

Zabuza tensed at hearing that Haku had been defeated. He felt anger and fear that Haku had been killed. His anger quickly overrode his fear and he redoubled his assault on the group. His only goal now was to get to Haku but that would be meaningless if they were still alive to hinder him. Zabuza was mid-swing when a giant gust of wind unbalanced them all.

The gust was accompanied by a shout that Zabuza recognized as the blonde brat. "**Fūton: Atsugai (Wind Style: Pressure Damage)!**" Naruto had unleashed a massive wave of wind that was powerful enough to push away Zabuza's mist.

When Zabuza looked over the sight he saw infuriated him. The Aburame was holding Haku up while the blonde brat was holding a kunai to Haku's throat. The implication obvious. However, it also told Zabuza that Haku was still alive which relieved him greatly.

The fight had seemingly reached a standstill as both parties stopped to look toward Naruto and Shino. "Hey there No Brows-san! Your friend and I were having a lot of fun, but I think I broke him..." Naruto was hoping to goad Zabuza into rescuing Haku which would hopefully allow this battle to end. "But I didn't break him too bad, he's still breathing." Every mind on the bridge finished the thought with *'for now.'*

Zabuza was irate and beginning to feel fear creep into him that Haku might seriously die. Still he could not show that fear lest the Konoha shinobi think they have a valuable piece. "If he lost than he is of no further use to me. I have no need of a broken tool." Zabuza had learned from experience that hostages only had value if the hostage taker thought the hostages had value.

Zabuza's theory was generally right. However, since Naruto knew Zabuza valued Haku's life his ability to bluff through this was impossible. "Well then I suppose if he is worthless then we have no further use for him." As he said this he started to drag the kunai across Haku's throat.

Zabuza narrowed his eyes and glared at the brat who had just killed Haku. "You're going to die very slowly brat!" Faster than the other jōnin could react Zabuza disappeared by using the **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** to appear behind Naruto and Shino. He promptly kicked both of them away before grabbing Haku." As soon as he touched his closest companion the body dissolved into a swarm of insects as did the bodies of the blonde brat and the Aburame. Zabuza was thoroughly shocked and surprised. *'Well played brat.'*

Naruto smirked as he saw Zabuza not reacting to the now swarming insects. "My that was a lot of effort for a useless and broken tool. Guess I was wrong. He is useful after all."

Zabuza turned around to see the real Naruto and Shino standing as they were before. Only this time there was no kunai to Haku's throat and Haku was staring wide eyed at Zabuza. Zabuza growled at being made a fool of. He wanted badly to flay the blonde brat alive but had unfortunately confirmed that Haku was valuable to him.

"Why don't we call this a draw, hmm? You get your man and go, and we don't pursue you. Fair deal, yes?" Naruto hoped this worked. The original plan was moot, but he could still let Haku and Zabuza live a bit longer than last time. *'Who knows. Maybe they'll end up fighting in Kiri's rebellion on their own.'* More than likely, Naruto thought, they'd die somewhere else. Life as a nukenin was never long with a few notable exceptions.

Zabuza growled again and grit his teeth as he spat out his response, "Fine! Release Haku to me and I'll leave." As soon as he saw the Aburame release Haku he used another **Shunshin (Body Flicker)** to appear next to the boy. "When I see you again brat," he leveled his harshest gaze at the blonde. "I will kill you!" He and Haku promptly disappeared as far away from the bridge as they could. Zabuza saw that Haku still looked confused. "Don't say anything Haku. Just...stay quiet." As far as he was concerned this only proved to Zabuza that he was right. Emotional attachment was the downfall of shinobi. "We'll return to our hideout and rest and leave as soon as possible. We've been here far too long and drawn too much attention." He only got a weak nod from Haku.

Haku was confused but also happy. For as long as he could remember Zabuza had taught him that emotional attachment was a weakness that enemies would exploit. He always believed he was nothing more than a tool to Zabuza. Until this day. *'What am I to you Zabuza-sama?'*

Back on the bridge Naruto was still staring at where Zabuza and Haku had disappeared. "Well that was certainly exciting." Zabuza was not the only one being gawked at. Naruto could only meet their eyes and tilt his head. "What? Did you want to keep fighting him or something?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Because I mean I can still sense them if you really want to. I'm sure Zabuza would be more than willing to resume fighting."

Raidō sighed and put his sword back in the scabbard. "Like I said Asuma. So glad my genin failed." Despite his words Raidō's respect for Naruto had risen a little for his gambit. Not many would have tried to bargain with a man like Zabuza. Let alone by using another person's life. Life was not something people assumed Zabuza cared about. As he looked back at Naruto he couldn't help but feel that Asuma was right. "Still, it would appear you were right. Your kids are good Asuma."

Asuma was in the process of lighting a cigarette. He took a huge drag and blew the smoke out. "Yeah...too good. If I didn't know who their families were, I'd think we have a couple of well trained spies on our hands." He was partially joking. Any spy worth their salt wouldn't attract as much attention as those three seemed to do, but that was also a clever way to throw suspicion off you. Spies liked to be average. Drawing just enough attention to be noticed but not so much as to be remembered. "You two mind sticking around till we finish our mission here?" He wasn't going to trust that Zabuza wouldn't be back to claim the bounty on his head.

"I don't see why not." Raidō finally looked at Asuma and frowned. The man was littered with fresh wounds. The most concerning was the arm. "You want me to patch you up?"

Asuma looked down for the first time actually noticing the wound. "Yeah, probably a good idea." Now that things had calmed down considerably Asuma remembered that Tazuna's workforce had been here when they arrived. "Shino!" He yelled for the boy to come over to him. He held up his arm as Raidō began to administer first aid. It wouldn't do much to heal him but at least it would prevent infection. "I want you to check on the townspeople here on the bridge. Patch them up if necessary, then wake them up and send them home." Shino nodded and walked away. Once they were alone ago Asuma relaxed. "That was too close a fight for me..."

Aoba agreed. "Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama are right." There was no need to clarify what they were right about. They had all been there when Jiraiya and Tsunade humiliated the best Konoha had to offer. Despite their advanced years the two Sannin had easily wiped the floor with half the jōnin who were unlucky enough to fight them. Gai was the only one who had come close to defeating one of them and that was after resorting to the **Hachiman (Eight Inner Gates)**. Had he unleashed the Eighth gate he might have even won; but nobody argued when he didn't, knowing what the price would be. It only drove the point home further.

As soon as Raidō finished bandaging Asuma's arm threw one of Asuma's arms over his shoulder. "Come on, let's get you to the bridge builder's home." The day had been full of too much excitement for all of them. Raidō was glad he wouldn't be the one writing this report up. He could just pass that bill onto Asuma since he was just the support squad leader.

Raidō started walking off which meant Asuma was walking off as well. "I'm tired Raidō. Not dead. I'm perfectly capable of walking on my own."

Raidō snorted. "Of course you are." Asuma didn't complain anything more so Raidō kept walking. He and Asuma came walking up just as Shino and Naruto had finished waking the last of the workers up. "Any fatalities here?"

Shino looked up from his position. "No sir. There were no fatalities."

It was another piece of curious news for Raidō. Zabuza had a reputation for slaughter, a well-earned and deserved reputation. The fact that nobody here had died was confusing. "Alright then. Collect your teammate and the client. We are returning to his home."

Raidō waited for the genin to collect the unconscious Shikamaru and the perfectly fine Tazuna. Once they were all assembled they began the short trek back to Tazuna's. Thankfully it seemed as if Zabuza would be keeping his word at least for the moment. As soon as they were back he laid Asuma on the couch and the man quickly fell asleep. *'Typical. Make me do all the work why don't you.'*

Since Asuma was sleeping Raidō decided to check on the man's genin. Speaking to the Aburame was straight forward. The boy seemed fine and

had fared the best out of all them with very few, *'If any,'* injuries.

The Nara was the most troubling. According to Shino the boy had been seriously injured, yet as he looked down at the sleeping form the boy looked perfectly fine. There were bandages in two places on his body, but they weren't bloody like he expected them to be. Having peeled the first few layers off and still not finding any blood he pulled the rest of them off. On the leg was a fresh scar. Just by looking at it Raidō would assume it was an old injury but that wouldn't make much sense. He moved on to the abdomen where a fresh patch of pink skin appeared. Poking it seemed to disturb the boy but other than that he was in good condition. It was all puzzling to Raidō. "What the devil happened with you?" He rewrapped the bandages seeing no reason not to.

As Raidō stood up from the boy he only had one person left to find. "Now, where is Uzumaki." He may not have been overly familiar with the other two, not even remembering their names, but he was very familiar with Uzumaki Naruto. Everybody in Konoha was. He was walking down the hall when he heard running water. Turning to the source of the noise he found the blonde-haired genin washing his hands. Raidō stood and watched as Naruto continuously and furiously rubbed his hands as if trying to wash something that wasn't there away. He sighed, reached over, and turned the facet off. "The blood is long gone by now." He handed Naruto a towel to dry his hands with.

"I can still feel it." His hand felt sticky and wet, and they smelled. Even if nobody else could smell the blood, Naruto could. No amount of washing would ever wash that smell away.

Raidō crossed his arms as he leant against the frame of the door. "Good. It means you don't enjoy killing. The second you stop feeling what you're feeling we have a real problem." He watched as the blonde rested his hands against the sink and stared at the mirror image of himself. *'This is the part of the job I was glad to avoid.'* Raidō had no desire to be a jōnin-sensei. He wasn't even a full jōnin but Konoha needed skilled teachers. So long as you weren't a chūnin you could be given a team. "We need to address the elephant in the room." Naruto finally met his gaze with a questioning look of his own. Raidō sighed and said only one word, "Kyūbi."

Naruto figured this was coming but had expected Asuma to try and question him. "What's there to ask? I used Kyūbi's chakra. It's like you all forget I only exist to use his power. It's why I was sacrificed." Everybody always made a big deal about Kyūbi and how its power shouldn't be used. *'Why make jinchūriki in the first place if you didn't want them to use that power?'* You don't give people a kunai and then expect them not to try and cut or stab something. It was the kunai's purpose to be a weapon.

"It's not that we forget, it's more about that power being terrifying." Raidō frowned but couldn't fault the boy's argument. Jinchūriki were meant to be weapons of mass destruction. "Word of advice try not being as blasé about it as you are. Most people won't react well hearing you willingly drew on that power."

Naruto snorted. "Most people don't react well with me being around in general, I fail to see how this will make things worse. Besides I have no doubt the second we get back this mission will be classified precisely because I used his chakra." Naruto slid past Raidō intent on being there when Shikamaru wakes up just as had been done for him all those times.

Raidō stayed where he was, frowning. *'I'm sorry Yondaime-sama.'* Raidō didn't need to be told who the boy's father was. Not many of the upper echelon needed such a useless memo. The truth was staring them right in the face the entire time. *'It really is astounding that the village remains ignorant in the wake of such truth.'*

Raidō also reflected on the way Naruto had spoken of and about Kyūbi. He referred to the chakra construct as an 'it' while Naruto referred to it as a 'he'. The concept of gender identification for bijū never entered his mind but it made him wonder if the Kyūbi was indeed a male. *'Still to think he'd reference using that chakra as no big deal is unnerving.'* Even if it was the boy's purpose as a jinchūriki to learn how to control that power the fact that he could easily call upon it made him shiver. Jinchūriki, whether they were loyal or not, were always terrifying.

The next three weeks seemed to pass in a blur for Asuma. The day after their last encounter with Zabuza the people of Nami finally felt the last vestiges of Gatō's influence fall away. There wasn't much of anything left to celebrate with, but they had done their best with what they had to really let the good times roll. With nothing left to cause them fear, the work on Tazuna's bridge sped up drastically. Tazuna had insisted Naruto refrain from helping out. The man had claimed it was to important to help make the people feel like they contributed to their own freedom. Asuma had laughed when Naruto just shrugged and said, "No problem."

Raidō and Aoba had also informed of what had befallen the Daimyō. Namely that the command of the man's samurai had for whatever reason turned against him and had placed the Daimyō and his family under house arrest. Being able to pass it off as protection from threats against their lord the rest of the force followed their commander having no reason to doubt his loyalty. Mix in some "new recruits" from Gatō that kept outside word from reaching the palace and you have an isolated rule with no way to govern.

The downside to this is that Gatō's supporters were also isolated from word from the outside. With no Gatō to keep them apprised of what to tell the Daimyō's guards what was "happening" in the outside world their ability to keep everything silent diminished. When word finally reached the Daimyō's forces, courtesy of Asuma, the commander had quickly been relieved and forced to commit seppuku. The entirety of the loyalists almost did the same after their commander's treachery was revealed. The shame they felt for failing their liege lord was insurmountable. Fortunately for all involved the Daimyō had forbidden it. Saying duty and honor had forced them to obey. They would not be punished for their superior's crimes.

The Daimyō's palace, and the term was being used liberally here, was exceptionally modest for the small nation. It rested on one of the smaller islands off the main island thus providing it natural defenses making it difficult to assault and infiltrate. Which brought Asuma back to now. The Daimyō had *insisted* that Asuma and his team visit him before they left. They were being escorted toward the main hall where the Daimyō and what remained of his court would be waiting.

Asuma had spent the last two days drilling his genin on court etiquette and politics which mostly resulted in him telling them to remain silent unless spoken to directly. Once the doors to the hall had been opened they were led in by a single samurai who moved to stand just before his lord. "Takenaka-sama," the samurai bowed full at the waist, "I have brought the Konoha shinobi as you requested." He silently dismissed himself once the words were said.

Asuma dropped to a knee and bowed his head. He had learned the art of "talk" the way royalty was accustomed to in his many years of service to the Daimyō of Hi no Kuni (Land of Fire). As his liege lord was technically of a higher station than this man Asuma could not lower himself completely even if he himself was not of equal standing. "Daimyō-sama." Asuma was happy to see his genin follow his lead and remain silent. "It is a privilege and honor to meet you."

"Please stand shinobi-san." Asuma stood and motioned for his genin to do the same. At this point it would be rude to not meet the man's gaze. "I owe you an immense debt of gratitude for your help in freeing my people, and myself, from this...Gatō character."

"I must confess I did not do it out of altruism Daimyō-sama. It was merely the safest way to ensure my mission was successful." Asuma didn't much care for the double talk that was often commonplace with royalty. It was too much of a damn headache to just not be upfront about things.

"Regardless of your reasons the end result is the same." The Daimyō took in Asuma's appearance and noticed the sash around the man's waist. "I see you are in service to Hiroshi-dono. I hope he is in good health."

"I left Hiroshi-sama's direct service nearly a year ago Daimyō-sama, but the last I saw of him he was in excellent health." Asuma knew that all the Daimyō knew every other Daimyō or at least knew of them. It was important to know who was above you and who was below you, especially if you were a small nation stuck between to larger nations that loved to expand their territory.

"Oh, is that so?" The Daimyō seemed genuinely surprised at the news. Having been cut off from the outside for who knows how long meant he had not heard of the unfortunate news about the Shugonin Jūnishi. "Hiroshi-dono must be somewhat lost without such a capable subordinate at his side. Still I must express my gratitude to him directly for your work here and perhaps. Now on to the real reason why we are here. No doubt you are curious as to why I asked to see you."

"The thought did cross my mind Daimyō-sama." Asuma was curious why they had been 'asked' to meet with the Daimyō face to face. Being told that his liege lord would be hearing of their work here was encouraging. The free publicity this would generate for Konoha and Hi no Kuni would bolster their image in the world and make them a bit less reproachable.

"As I understand it you and your men have not been properly compensated for the risk you undertook when you accepted this mission and that one of my citizens had knowingly withheld information that endangered you and your subordinates. I wish to offer restitution for your actions and service here." Komatsu gestured for one of his courtesans to deliver Asuma the scroll he had dictated earlier in the day. "I hope you will find this a suitable arrangement."

Asuma took the proffered scroll and unrolled it to read its contents. What he saw went far beyond what he expected. He had floated the idea of taking a small percentage of Nami's trade revenue until Tazuna's debt to Konoha had been paid off. Naturally the Daimyō would have to sign off on it but Asuma didn't expect to be given this. "This is far too generous Daimyō-sama."

Komatsu waived his hand dismissively. "Nonsense. As I said you are owed a significant debt on behalf of myself and my people." That and Komatsu wanted to discourage any unpleasantness with Hi no Kuni if they thought he might be trying to swindle them even indirectly. "Please deliver this to your Hokage and to Hiroshi-dono. If they find the terms unacceptable I would be happy to oblige them. If there is anything I can do for you before you depart please do not hesitate to ask."

Asuma seriously doubted either his father or his Daimyō would turn down such generous terms. More like he knew they couldn't. *'It would seem you were well trained Komatsu-sama.'* The terms of repayment the man had offered were so generous if word ever got out that they were rejected it would hurt their reputation. "I don't think there will be any problems Daimyō-sama. If there is nothing else, we have a long journey back to Konoha and I am eager to get home." While it might seem rude to rush this conversation along, Asuma wanted nothing more than to return home and go on some nice boring D-Ranks for a week. *'I can't wait until they have to chase Tora.'*

There was one more leg to this mission Asuma knew they had to complete before they could head back, and he doubted very much that Naruto would be willing to skip it. "Since you have generously offered assistance Daimyō-sama, if you could direct us to a skilled captain and crew we have one more journey to make before we return home."

Komatsu smiled. "Of course. I am curious though where you could be heading to from here." There wasn't much around except for islands belonging to Mizu no Kuni and the once famed Uzu no Kuni. "The reason I ask is to ensure you receive the best help possible."

Asuma didn't exactly want to share where they were going but they'd have to tell somebody else eventually. "Uzu no Kuni, more specifically Uzushigakure."

Komatsu adopted a neutral expression but inside was agitated. "Why the devil would you want to brave those hazardous waters? The nation was all but destroyed decades ago. I doubt anything is left after the invaders had their way."

Asuma looked toward Naruto silently asking what he wanted to do here. It was no secret in Konoha that his surname was Uzumaki, but the once famed clan had been forgotten. Often overshadowed by their cousins the Senju.

Naruto stepped forward in front of Asuma and bowed. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto, Daimyō-sama." As he straightened back up he could see the man's eyes narrow questioningly at his name. "I wish to visit my family's ancestral home and see if there is anything that might be left that I could recover for my family."

'Maelstrom. A good name for an Uzumaki.' Komatsu looked the boy over and frowned. *'The blonde hair and face markings are not consistent with what my father told me to expect from an Uzumaki.'* His family had been guarding a secret since before Uzu's destruction at the behest of the Uzumaki. A closely guarded secret told only to the heir-apparent. Uzu might be gone but their silence would stand until the end of time. "An Uzumaki you say? I must say it has been some time since these halls were graced by the presence of your clansmen."

"Yes, Daimyō-sama. My mother was Uzumaki Kushina who was sent to Konoha shortly before her home's downfall and destruction."

Komatsu was dubious about the boy's claims, but it had been a long time since they had been asked to carry this burden. Even he wasn't entirely sure what it was. The secret having long been lost in the process of handing it down from generation to generation. "Fascinating. Perhaps you can help me then." Komatsu asked for his new guard commander to fetch a specific chest from his office. He removed a key from around his neck and handed it to the man. "Many years ago my family commissioned an item of great importance from the Uzumaki but they neglected to tell us how to open it as such as it remained lost to my family ever since." A lie, but a necessary lie.

"If you by chance can somehow uncover its secret I would be more than willing to assist you." A few moments later the man the Daimyō had sent to fetch the chest returned and handed it to him. Komatsu stood up and walked toward Naruto.

Naruto was looking at the box that the Daimyō now held. It was small but very ornate. The most noticeable markings on it were the swirls often associated with his family and the crest of what he could only assume was the Daimyō's family. "What's inside?"

Komatsu hummed. "I do not know. Neither did my father. This was commissioned by my grandfather shortly before his death and he died before its completion. The only thing he ever said was that it was our family's greatest legacy." Another lie, but only a half-life this time. He set the chest down before the young teen. "The assistance you require lies within reach." *'I hope.'*

In truth Komatsu knew exactly how to open the box. It was a simple blood seal keyed to his family as was originally designed. The contents of however could only be claimed by an Uzumaki. His great great grandfather had married an Uzumaki woman and loosely joined their families together. They were never important enough for it to be a big deal but when the head of the Uzumaki clan came to them one day asking for a favor they could not refuse. They had been asked to hold a scroll until an Uzumaki one day came to claim it. *'Or reclaim in this case.'* What was in the scroll was not asked. It was hidden away in the box that lay before Naruto. Komatsu watched as the boy began to look over the box. *'I wonder if you are the one Uzumaki-san.'*

Naruto lifted the box off the ground and began turning it over in his hands as he looked at each side. *'The carvings while meant to look decorative are an elaborate fūinjutsu array.'* Naruto traced his hands along the carving feeling the texture of it. *'A simple yet elegantly carved array meant to strengthen the structure of the item.'* He had never seen such a beautifully carved seal in his life. *'Truly it is a lost art.'* Naruto typically only used paper as the catalyst to make his seals and had never tried to use other objects. Paper and ink or blood were the staples of his craft.

As he came to what he assumed was the lid he noticed a familiar looking array. *'A blood seal...but for whom?'* Naruto noticed Komatsu was still standing before him and studying his every move. Looking at the rest of the box Naruto couldn't help but feel it was for his family since their crest adorned it so heavily. He bit his thumb and let a drop fall on the center of the seal and tried to open it. It didn't. He frowned and looked up to see Komatsu smiling at him.

"You are knowledgeable of seals. That is encouraging. However, that seal was not meant for you." Komatsu pulled a hidden dagger from the sleeve of his hakama and made a small cut on his thumb before he too allowed a drop to fall on the center of the seal. He then opened the chest and took its contents out. In his hand was a single scroll case. "This was given to my family by the head of the Uzumaki clan in the time of my great grandfather. We were told to guard it until an Uzumaki came to claim it. If you truly are an Uzumaki then you will be able to open this scroll." Komatsu reclaimed the chest from Naruto and left the scroll in his hand.

Komatsu had silently ordered his samurai to be ready to attack. If this person was not an Uzumaki he would kill him and his companions or die trying to keep this secret from getting out.

Naruto looked at the scroll and saw another blood seal on the clasp that held the case closed. Biting the same thumb again Naruto placed a drop of blood in the center and watched as the clasp came undone. He tipped the case over and a scroll fell into his hands. He unrolled it and began to read its contents.

To the Uzumaki unfortunate enough to be reading this,

Well met clansman. It is unfortunate that you are reading this letter as it means our family is more than likely gone, and that you are our last living brother or sister. I sincerely hope our family's passing was not a result of conquest, but it is the most likely result given the cruelties of our world. Long has our family stood apart from the rest of the world. We have avoided their conflicts and moved only to defend our family. Family as I hope you are unconsciously aware is the most important thing to us. I hope if you do not know anything of your heritage that you know you are loved by all who bear the name Uzumaki. Regardless of your past and your actions you are our beloved clansman.

Now on to the real purpose of why I write this letter.

Our cousin Senju Hashirama has, to my utter disbelief, gotten his family's greatest nemesis to agree to a truce. Now we here talk of their designs to formalize an alliance and build a safe haven for themselves. It is an action I have thrown the full support of our family behind. There is far too much conflict in this world and any attempts to curb them will receive our support. I only hope by doing this I have not doomed our family to destruction.

With any luck this letter will never see the light of day but if it does than you are our last gift to the world. We have been approached many times by other clans who desire our skills in water manipulation and the sealing arts, and each time we have refused. We do not refuse out of malice or hatred, but because these clans want our skill to wage war, to cause mayhem and destruction, or to enslave. These are not our waves. We fight only when forced. When our family is threatened.

As a result, we have been called selfish, and to our utter disbelief warmongers. How can a clan that avoids conflict and intentionally isolates itself from the world possibly be considered a warmonger? A question I have been pondering for some time now.

Despite our official and loud proclamation that we shall only ever be a neutral party, my fear that we might one day become the targets of the viciousness of the world is great. This letter is but a piece of our legacy. A failsafe to ensure that if our clan, if scattered, will not be without hope. You have become responsible for that hope.

My beloved niece has married a good man from our southern neighbor. A peculiar match of nobility and peasantry. The love she feels for her new husband is genuine and I believe the feelings are mutual. She will be leaving us soon to live with her new family, but she will always belong to us in our hearts and minds. Unbeknownst to her she has become the vessel of our legacy. Her husbands' father, at my behest, has graciously agreed to hide our family's legacy until the day it is needed. A day I pray never comes.

Obviously, my prayers have gone unanswered or were ignored. Regardless I can only hope this letter makes it into the hands of one of my clansmen. I have sent a copy of our family's legacy to be hidden by our new extended family. It is to be protected in a way that only our family may access. It will fall upon my successor and their successor to continue to maintain our family's story should the worst befall us.

With deepest regrets and sympathies,

Uzumaki Kosuke

Naruto rolled the letter back up and looked at Komatsu. "Do you know where it is?"

Komatsu smiled. "Of course. Though I have no idea what it is I know exactly where it is. As do you Uzumaki-san." The best place to hide something was in plain sight.

"It's the box isn't it?" Naruto sighed as he saw Komatsu smile innocently. Taking the chest back from Komatsu looked inside to see more seals

carved into the inside of the box. These were clearly storage seals. "Can I take this with us when we leave?"

"It was never mine to keep Uzumaki-san." He bowed lightly at the young teen who had allowed his family to fulfill their oath. "You have no idea how much joy it brings me to see this duty to conclusion. If you still desire to go to Uzushioagakure one day seek me out and I shall offer whatever assistance I can, but for the moment I think you have plenty to examine."

Naruto offered a genuine smile as he bowed. "I do Daimyō-sama. I am eternally grateful for what you have given me." He had no idea what he had been given but if it came from his family he would treasure it.

Komatsu returned to his seat and adopted a neutral indifferent expression once more. "I wish you a safe speedy journey on your return home."

The Konoha group bowed one last time and beat a hasty exit at the obvious dismissal. Once they were outside Naruto couldn't help but voice his surprise. "That was unexpected."

"Indeed. It did save us a treacherous journey to Uzushioagakure." Shino didn't much care for large bodies of water. Water tended to drown his insects. Not an ideal environment to find himself, especially with a porous body.

Asuma was relieved. This mission was crazy enough without having to go to Uzu. "Always expect the unexpected with royalty. When you think you have them figured out they'll find a way to surprise you. Now let's head home." No more C-Ranks for me. I'll take a nice tricky B-Rank any day of the week. *'At least then I know to expect real danger.'*

After three days of intense travel they were finally nearing the main gates of Konoha. Asuma was so looking forward to making it back and spending the next week free from any real duties. The one benefit of a surprise jump in rank of this kind of mission meant lots of time off. It'd give him a lot of time extra time to train so he wouldn't be in a situation like he was with Zabuzza again. The familiar faces of Izumo and Kotetsu were a welcome sight to his eyes. "Team Asuma returning back from an escort and protection mission." He signed the ledger and had each of the genin do the same. *'It's good to be home.'*

"Your presence has been requested in the Hokage's office Asuma." After Raido's team returned Izumo had been told to send Asuma directly to the Hokage for debriefing. "You and your entire team." It was rare for genin to participate in any debriefing, especially with the Hokage, but Izumo had heard there were extenuating circumstances on their mission.

"Right." Asuma started walking into the village. "Come on team. The sooner we do this the sooner we can go home and rest."

While the group was slowly walking away and heading toward the Hokage's office to make their report Kotetsu was chuckling softly. "They're in for quite the surprise when they get there, right Izumo?"

Izumo nodded. "They've been away for months and a lot has changed."

As Asuma walked into the tower he had another gnawing feeling in his gut that something was off. Nearing the office doors, they didn't have to wait as the secretary just ushered them in saying they were expected. Asuma walked in and bowed, not bothering to look who was behind the desk. "Hokage-sama."

The voice that called out to him was not the one he was expecting. "You're late Sarutobi. You were due back a week ago."

The group stared wide-eyed at the person who had addressed them. Confusion was written all over their faces before Naruto cried out, "Baa-chan?! What are you doing here?"

I feel a little mean ending it the way I am knowing full well I have three more missions for you to read before you get to find out anything. I have to admit this was not how I anticipated ending the Wave mission or handling Naruto going to Uzu. Namely that he didn't. I also know its mean to not tell you what he was given. I'm horrible, aren't I? Do I have reasons for doing this? Yeah. Mostly they center around me wanting to be a jerk and hopefully making some of you freak out over what has happened in the two and a half months they were gone. I know I did poorly with establishing the passing of time and I apologize for that. One day when I reach a point and feel like going through these chapters and fixing them up the way they should be I'll do it, but for the moment I'm afraid this is what you get.